THE TRAIL HORDE

CHARLES ALDEN SELTZER

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BY

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THE BOSS OF THE LAZY Y,
THE RANGE BOSS,
THE RANCHMAN, ETC.

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THE TRAIL HORDE

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The Trail Horde

CHAPTER I

CONCERNING MORALS

THERE were fifty thousand acres within view of the ranchhouse—virgin grass land dotted with sage, running over a wide level, into little hills, and so on to an upland whose rise was so gradual that it could be seen only from a distance, best from the gallery of the ranchhouse.

The first tang of autumn was in the sage-scented breeze that swept the county, and the tawny valley, basking in the warm sunlight that came down from a cloudless sky, showed its rugged beauty to advantage.

Kane Lawler paused at the edge of the gallery and filled his lungs from the sage-laden breeze, and then wheeled to face his mother.

She smiled at him.

"Have you seen Ruth Hamlin lately, Kane?"

Lawler's lips opened, then closed again, tightly. And by that token Mrs. Lawler knew that something Kane had been on the point of saying never would be said. For she knew her son as no other person in the country knew him.

Kane Lawler was big. From the broad shoulders

that bulged the gray flannel shirt, down the yellow corduroy trousers that encased his legs to the tops of the boots with their high heels and dull-roweled spurs, Lawler looked what he was, a man who asked no favors of his kind.

Mrs. Lawler had followed him out of the house, and she now stood near him, watching him.

There was in Lawler's lean face as he turned from his mother and peered steadily out into the valley, a hint of volcanic force, of resistless energy held in leash by a contrary power. That power might have been grim humor — for his keen gray eyes were now gleaming with something akin to humor — it might have been cynical tolerance — for his lips were twisted into a curious, mirthless half-smile; it might have been the stern repression that had governed him all his days.

Whatever it was it seemed to be no secret from his mother, for she smiled understandingly, and with pride that must have been visible to anyone who watched her.

Massed in the big valley — at a distance of two or three miles from the big ranchhouse, was a herd of cattle. Circling them were a number of cowboys on horses. In the huge corral that spanned a shallow, narrow river, were other cattle. These were the result of the fall — or beef — round-up. For a month there had been intense activity in the section. Half the cattlemen in the county had participated in the round-up that had centered upon Lawler's range, the Circle L; and the cattle had been herded down in the valley because of its natural advantages.

There the herd had been held while the neighboring

cattlemen engaged in the tedious task of "cutting out" — which meant that each cattle owner took from the herd the steers that bore his "brand," with the addition of a proportionate number of unbranded steers, and calves, designated as "mavericks." Then the neighboring outfit had driven their stock home.

"It was a big round-up, Kane," said Mrs. Lawler, watching the herd.

"Eight thousand head," Lawler replied. "We're starting a thousand toward Willets today."

"Have you seen Gary Warden? I mean, have you arranged with Warden to have him take the cattle?"

Lawler smiled. "I had an agreement with Jim Lefingwell. We made it early last spring."

"A written agreement?"

"Shucks — no. I never had a written agreement with Lefingwell. Never had to. Jim's word was all I ever wanted from him — all I ever asked for."

"But perhaps Gary Warden's business methods are different?"

"I talked that over with Lefingwell when he sold out to Warden. Jim said he'd already mentioned our agreement to Warden and that Warden had agreed to carry it out."

"But suppose Warden has changed his mind?"

Lawler spoke seriously. "No man goes back on his word in this country. But from what I've heard of Warden, he's likely to. If he does, we'll drive the stock to Keppler, at Red Rock. Keppler isn't buying for the same concern, but he'll pay what Lefingwell agreed to pay. We'll ship them, don't worry."

"Red Rock means a five hundred mile drive, Kane."

Lawler replied, "You're anticipating, Mother. Warden will take them."

Lawler grinned and stepped off the gallery. A few minutes later he emerged from the stable carrying a saddle, which he flung over one of the top rails of the corral fence. He roped a big, red bay, smooth, with a glossy coat that shone like a flame in the clear white light of the morning sun.

The bay was built on heroic lines. He was tall and rangy, and the spirit of a long line of thoroughbred ancestors was in him. It showed in the clear white of his gleaming, indomitable eyes, in his thin, sensitive nostrils and long, shapely muzzle; in the contour of his head and chest, and in his slender, sinewy legs.

Man and horse were big, capable, strong-willed. They were equipped for life in the grim, wild country that surrounded them. From the slender, powerful limbs of the big bay, to the cartridge-studded belt that encircled the man's middle, with a heavy pistol at the right hip, they seemed to typify the ruggedness of the country, seemed to embody the spirit of the Wild.

Lawler mounted, and the big bay whistled as he pranced across the ranchhouse yard to the big corral where the cattle were confined. Lawler brought the bay to a halt at a corner of the corral fence, where his foreman, Blackburn, who had been breakfasting in the messhouse, advanced to meet him, having seen Lawler step down from the gallery.

Blackburn was of medium height, swarthy, with heavy brows under which were keen, deep-set eyes.

His mouth was big, expressive, with a slightly cynical set in repose.

"We're hittin' the trail in about an hour," said Blackburn. "Are you wantin' me to put 'em through, or are we takin' two days to it, as usual?"

"Two days," advised Lawler. "There's no hurry. It's a bad trail in spots, and they'll want to feed. They'll stand the trip on the cars better if they've had plenty of grass."

"Gary Warden is keeping Lefingwell's agreement with you, I reckon?" asked Blackburn. He eyed Lawler intently.

"Of course." Lawler caught the expression of his foreman's eyes, and his brows drew together. He added: "Why do you ask?"

"Just wonderin'," hesitated Blackburn; "just wonderin'. You seen this here man, Warden?"

Lawler had not met Warden; he had not even seen the man from a distance. That was because he had not visited Willets since Warden had bought Lefingwell's ranch and assumed Lefingwell's position as resident buyer for a big eastern live-stock company. Lawler had heard, though, that Warden seemed to be capable enough; that he had entered upon the duties of his position smoothly without appreciable commotion; he had heard that Warden was quiet and "easy-going," and that as a cattle buyer he seemed to "know his business."

This information had reached Lawler's ears through the medium of neighboring cattle owners, and he was willing to accept it as accurate, though he was not

prepared to form an estimate of Warden until he had an opportunity to talk with him personally.

"Well," went on Blackburn; "them that's looked him over don't hesitate to say he don't measure up to Jim Lefingwell's size."

"Jim was a mighty big man—in size and principles," said Lawler.

"Now you're shoutin'! There wasn't no man bigger'n Jim, sideways, edgeways, or up an' down. I reckon any man would have a hard time measurin' up to Jim Lefingwell. Mebbe that's what's wrong with Warden. Folks has got Jim Lefingwell on their minds, an' they're not givin' Warden what's comin' to him, them bein' biased." He squinted at Lawler. "Folks is hintin' that Warden don't own Jim Lefingwell's ranch a-tall; that some eastern guys bought it, an' that Warden's just managin' it. Seems like they's a woman at the Lefingwell's old place, keepin' Warden company. She's eastern, too, they say. Got a old maid with her to keep her company—a chapper-own, they say—which ain't in no ways illuminatin' my think-tank none. Which is a chapper-own?"

"A kind of a moral monitor, Blackburn," grinned Lawler. "Some folks need them. If you're thinking of getting one ——"

"Bah!" Blackburn's eyes were vitriolic with disgust. "I sabe what you are hintin' at when you gas of morals—which I'm a heap acquainted with because I ain't got none to speak of. But I'm plumb flabbergasted when you go to connectin' a battleship with anything that's got a whole lot to do with morals.

Accordin' to my schoolin', a monitor is a thing which blows the stuffin' out of ——"

"A monitor of morals could do that," gravely said Lawler. "In fact, according to the best authorities, there have been many monitors who have blown the stuffing out of the reputations of their charges."

Blackburn gulped. He was puzzled, and his eyes were glazed with the incomprehension which had seized him. Twice again as he watched Lawler's grave face he gulped. And then he eyed Lawler belligerently.

"I reckon them monitors is eastern. I've never seen one galivantin' around these parts."

"They're a lot eastern," assented Lawler. "I've never seen one, but I've read about them in books. And once my mother saw one — she tells me the East raises them by the hundred."

"That accounts for it," declared Blackburn; "anything which comes from the East is likely to be a heap shy on hoss sense."

He now squinted at Lawler, watching him keenly.

"Accordin' to report Joe Hamlin ought to go around draggin' one of them monitors."

Blackburn shrewdly noted the quickening of Lawler's eyes, and the dull red that stole into his face.

"What do you mean, Blackburn?"

"Davies an' Harris hit town ag'in last night; an' comin' back they run plumb into Joe Hamlin. He was in the upper end of the box arroyo. He'd roped an' hog-tied a Circle L cow an' was blottin' our brand out."

"What happened?" Lawler's lips were set in grim lines.

"Nothin'—followin' your orders regardin the cuss. Davies an' Harris let him go—after warnin' him. Somethin' ought to be done. It ain't addin' a heap to the morals of the outfit for the men to know a man can rustle cattle that promiscious—an' the boss not battin' an eyewinker. This is the fourth time he's been caught with the goods—to say nothin' of the times he's done it without nobody gittin' wise—an' the boys is beginnin' to ask questions, bein' a heap puzzled because somethin' don't happen to Joe."

Lawler's face was expressionless. Except for the flush in his cheeks he seemed to be unaffected by Blackburn's words. His voice was a trifle cold when he spoke:

"I'll attend to Hamlin. I'll stop at the Two Bar on my way to Willets. By the time you reach town with the cattle I'll have the deal with Warden clinched."

Blackburn nodded, and Lawler wheeled the bay, heading him northward.

As he rode, Lawler's face changed expression. He frowned, and his lips set stiffly.

What he had been almost on the point of telling his mother was that he knew why Ruth Hamlin had refused him. It was pride, nothing less. Lawler suspected that Ruth knew her father was a rustler. In fact, there had been times when he had seen that knowledge lying naked in her eyes when she looked at her parent. Accusation and disgust had been there, but

mingling with them was the persistent loyalty that had always governed the girl; the protective instinct, and a hope of reformation.

The pride that Mrs. Lawler had exhibited was not less strong in the girl's heart. By various signs Lawler knew the girl loved him; he knew it as positively as he knew she would not marry him while the stigma of guilt rested upon her parent. And he was convinced that she was ignorant of the fact that Lawler shared her secret. That was why Lawler had permitted Hamlin to escape; it was why he had issued orders to his men to suffer Hamlin's misdeeds without exacting the expiation that custom provided. Lawler did not want Ruth to know that he knew.

He sent the big bay forward at a steady, even pace, and in an hour he had crossed the sweep of upland and was riding a narrow trail that veered gradually from the trail to Willets. The character of the land had changed, and Lawler was now riding over a great level, thickly dotted with bunch grass, with stretches of bars, hard sand, clumps of cactus and greasewood.

He held to the narrow trail. It took him through a section of dead, crumbling lava and rotting rock; through a little stretch of timber, and finally along the bank of a shallow river — the Wolf — which ran after doubling many times, through the Circle L valley.

In time he reached a little grass level that lay close to the river. A small cabin squatted near the center of the clearing, surrounded by several outbuildings in a semi-dilapidated condition, and a corral, in which there were several horses.

Lawler sent Red King straight toward the cabin. When he reached the cabin he swung off and walked toward the door, his lips set in straight lines, his manner decisive.

He had taken only several steps when a voice greeted him, coming from the interior of the cabin — a man's voice, snarling, venomous:

"You come another step, Kane Lawler, an' I'll bore you!"

Lawler halted, facing the door. The door was closed, but a little slide in the upper part of it was open. Through the aperture projected the muzzle of a rifle, and behind the rifle appeared a man's face — dark, bearded, with eyes that gleamed with ferocious malignancy.

CHAPTER II

DRIVING A BARGAIN

LAWLER stiffened. There was no mistaking the deadly threat of the rifle and the man's menacing manner. Lawler's face was pale, but his eyes were unwavering as they looked into those that glared out at him through the aperture in the door.

Guilt and fear were the emotions that had driven Hamlin to this rather hysterical threat. Lawler resisted an impulse to laugh, though he felt a pulse of grim humor shoot through him.

To his knowledge — excepting Hamlin's predilection to rustle cattle — the man was harmless. He never had been known to draw a gun, even in self-defense, and Lawler was convinced that there was not sufficient provocation for him to break one of the rules that had governed him until now. Hamlin might be goaded, or frightened, into using the rifle, but Lawler had no intention of goading or frightening him. In fact, being aware of the reason for Hamlin's belligerence, he had no intention of acquainting the man with the knowledge of what had happened the night before. At least, not at this instant.

Lawler's lips wore a shadowy smile.

"I reckon you don't know me, Hamlin?" he said.

"I know you mighty well, Lawler," snapped Hamlin; "you heard me mention your name!"

"Then you've got a new way of greeting your friends, eh — with a rifle. Well, put it down and open the door. There's some things I want to say to you."

"What about?" asked Hamlin, suspiciously. Overwhelming every other thought in his mind was the conviction that Davies and Harris had apprised Lawler of what had happened the night before, and that Lawler had come to capture him, single-handed.

"About Ruth."

The wild gleam in Hamlin's eyes began to dull. However, he was still suspicious.

"You seen any of your men this mornin' — Davies or Harris?" he asked.

"Davies and Harris went to town last night. I reckon they didn't get back yet. What's Davies and Harris got to do with me visiting you?"

"Nothin'." There was relief in Hamlin's voice. The muzzle of the rifle wavered; the weapon was withdrawn and the slide closed. Then the door slowly opened, and Hamlin appeared in it, a six-shooter in hand.

"If you're foolin' me, Kane Lawler, I'll sure bore you a-plenty!" he threatened.

"Shucks!" Lawler advanced to the door, ignoring the heavy pistol, which was shoved close to his body as he walked into the cabin, Hamlin retreating before him.

"Hamlin, you're losing whatever sense you had," said Lawler as he halted near the center of the big room. There were three rooms, their doors opening from the one in which Lawler and Hamlin stood.

"Meanin' what?" demanded Hamlin, nervously fingering the six-shooter.

It was clear that Hamlin was impressed with the repressed force that he could see in Lawler; with the slumbering energy that Lawler's lithe, sinewy body suggested; with the man's complete lack of fear and with the cold confidence that swam in his steady eyes.

Hamlin did not know at this minute whether or not he had meant to shoot Lawler. He believed that if Lawler had told him he had come to take him for blotting out the Circle L brand in the arroyo the preceding night he would have killed Lawler. But he was not sure. Something about Lawler made the thought of shooting him seem ridiculous. It would take a lot of provocation for *any* man to kill Lawler, for something about Lawler seemed to hint that it couldn't be done.

"Meaning that you are old enough to know that you can't keep on rustling my cattle without getting in trouble."

"Ah!" exclaimed Hamlin, his breath hissing through his teeth as he sucked it in with a gasp; "you sneaked on me, damn you!"

He threw the muzzle of the pistol up, his body stiffening, his eyes glittering with the malignance that had been in them when he had been looking out at Lawler through the aperture in the door.

"You know about that deal, an' you've come for me. You tried to fool me, eh—tellin' me that you didn't see Davies an' Harris. Well, damn your hide you ain't goin' to take me; I'll blow you to hell first!"

Lawler's eyes were steady and unblinking as he watched Hamlin; they bored into Hamlin's with a compelling intensity, that brought a conviction of futility into Hamlin's soul. They were cold eyes — cold as icebergs, Hamlin thought as he watched them; but they seemed to flame also, to flame with a fire that was cold as the ice in them.

The terrible power of them, and the promise of volcanic action back in them; the awful confidence that shone in them; the threat compelling Hamlin against his will, deadening his muscles, jumbling his thoughts —brought chaos into the man's brain, and he stood, his mouth agape with wonder over the thing that was happening to him, as Lawler walked steadily to him. He made no resistance as Lawler deliberately wrenched the pistol from his hand and as deliberately walked to a side wall and placed it upon a shelf.

Hamlin stood, nerveless and pallid, for an instant, watching Lawler's movements — until Lawler turned and faced him again. Then he staggered to a chair and dropped into it, lowering his head dejectedly, sitting with his hands folded, completely subjected.

Lawler would hang him, now. Lawler would take him to the Circle L and turn him over to Blackburn and the other men of the outfit. And Blackburn would hang him, for Blackburn had told him he would. Or, if Lawler didn't take him to Blackburn he would take him to the sheriff. He would be hanged then, but he would go to the new prison at the capital, and Ruth would have to stay on here to do the real suffering for his misdeeds.

"You damned fool!" came Lawler's voice into the vacuumlike stillness of the cabin. "You haven't got nerve enough to shoot a coyote!"

Hamlin knew it; he knew, now, at least, that he hadn't had nerve enough to shoot Lawler. He cringed under Lawler's contemptuous tone. And then he became aware that Lawler was speaking again.

"I'm giving you another chance. I'm letting you off, clean. For Ruth's sake.

"Look here, Hamlin!"

Hamlin's chin was caught in an iron grasp and he found himself looking into the terrible eyes. He saw grim pity in the eyes and he shuddered.

"Ruth knows you're stealing cattle. Everybody knows it, now. Who is buying them?"

"Singleton."

"Singleton!" Lawler's voice snapped with astonishment. "Dave Singleton, Lefingwell's old range boss?"

Hamlin nodded. And then the grip of Lawler's fingers on his chin relaxed. He heard Lawler step back, but he did not lift his head for a few minutes, during which a strained silence descended upon the room. Then he covertly raised his head, to see Lawler standing with his arms folded over his chest, watching him.

Lawler had not suspected Singleton. Between himself and Singleton there had always been a lack of ordinary cordiality, a constraint closely approaching dislike; but Lawler had never entertained a suspicion that Lefingwell's range boss was dishonest.

Hamlin was a moral weakling, he knew. Everybody in the Wolf River section knew it. Hamlin was lazy and shiftless, seemingly contented to drift along in an aimless way, regardless of what happened to him. There was at Hamlin's feet some of the wealth that other cattlemen of the district were gaining. He had proved on a quarter-section of good grass land amid plenty of water, and yet he chose to steal cattle rather than raise them.

Lawler's pity for the man was stronger than the resentment he felt. Hamlin was Ruth's father, though looking at him as he sat dejectedly in the chair, Lawler found it hard to discern the relationship.

"How long has Singleton been buying cattle from you?"

"About a year. I sold him what stock I had, before —before I got to runnin' my brand on other folks' stock, an' he hinted he wasn't particular whose cattle I got, long as he could get 'em under the market price."

"Does Singleton come here?"

"Sometimes—mostly nights."

Lawler's quick conclusion was that Ruth must have seen Singleton at the cabin, must have noted that the visits seemed surreptitious. Perhaps she had watched, convincing herself of her father's guilt. Lawler had wondered how she had gained the knowledge she seemed to have, and Singleton's visits must be the explanation.

Hamlin had bowed his head again after a swift glance at Lawler. He stiffened when he felt Lawler at his side again, for there had come into the atmos-

phere of the cabin a premonitory chill which warned him that Lawler was on the verge of action.

But he was not prepared for what happened.

Lawler's sinewy hands fell on his shoulders. The fingers bit deeply into the flesh, drawing a groan of pain from Hamlin. He was lifted to his feet — off his feet, so that he dangled in the air like a pendulum. He was suspended by the shoulders, Lawler's fingers gripping him like iron hooks; he was shaken until his feet, powerless to retard the movement, were flopping back and forth wildly, and his teeth rattled despite his efforts to clench them. It seemed to him that Lawler would snap his head from his shoulders, so viciously did Lawler shake him. Then suddenly the terrible fingers relaxed, and Hamlin reeled and swayed, dizzy and weak from the violence of movement. He was trying to keep his feet solidly on the floor when he felt Lawler's fingers at his throat.

To his astonishment, the fingers did not sink into the flesh. They touched his throat lightly, and he dazedly met Lawler's eyes, burning, with a passion he never had seen in them before. And Lawler's voice was dry and light, but steady — so steady and cold that Hamlin realized that only the man's complete mastery of himself had kept him from committing murder.

"Hamlin, I ought to kill you. I'm letting you off on one condition — that you break off with Singleton, and that you keep silent about the things we both know. If you confess to Ruth that you've been rustling cattle, or if you tell her — or hint of it — that I know you've been rustling — I'll tear you apart!

"You're like a lot of other damned, weak-kneed polecats. You've got a girl who is good as gold, and you're making a regular hell for her. She's wise to what you've been doing — she suspects you. And from now on you're going to show her that she was wrong — that you're straight and square.

"There's a job for you over at the Circle L — if you want it. I'll throw things in your way; I'll put you on your feet again — give you stock and tools, and pretend I've sold them to you. I'll do anything to keep you square. But if you tell Ruth, I'll kill you as sure as my name is Lawler!"

"I'm agreein'," said Hamlin, thickly. "I ain't wanted to do the things I've been doin'. But things didn't go right, an' Singleton — damn it, Lawler; I never liked the man, an' I don't know *why* I've been doin' what I have been doin'. But I've wanted to do somethin' for Ruth — so's she could quit teachin' an' live like a lady. I thought if I could get a bunch of coin together that mebbe she'd have ——"

"She'd see you dead before she'd touch it," scoffed Lawler.

"Mebbe I'd be better off if I was dead," said Hamlin, glumly.

"You'll die, right enough, if you don't keep your word to me," grimly declared Lawler.

He strode to the door, leaped upon Red King and rode away.

Inside the cabin, Hamlin got to his feet and swayed toward the door, reaching it and looking out, to see Lawler riding rapidly toward Willets.

CHAPTER III

A WOMAN'S EYES

THERE had been a day when Willets was but a name, designating a water tank and a railroad siding where panting locomotives, hot and dry from a long run through an arid, sandy desert that stretched westward from the shores of civilization, rested, while begrimed, overalled men adjusted a metal spout which poured refreshing water into gaping reservoirs.

In that day Willets sat in the center of a dead, dry section, swathed in isolation so profound that passengers in the coaches turned to one another with awe in their voices and spoke of God and the insignificance of life.

But there was a small river near the water tank—the headwaters of the Wolf—or there had been no tank. And a prophet of Business, noting certain natural advantages, had influenced the railroad company to build a corral and a station.

From that day Willets became assured of a future. Cattlemen in the Wolf River section began to ship stock from the new station, rather than drive to Red Rock—another shipping point five hundred miles east.

From the first it became evident that Willets would not be a boom town. It grew slowly and steadily until its fame began to trickle through to the outside world

—though it was a cattle town in the beginning, and a cattle town it would remain all its days.

Therefore, because of its slow growth, there were old buildings in Willets. The frame station had an ancient appearance. Its roof sagged in the center, its walls were bulging with weakness. But it stood defiantly flaunting its crimson paint above the wooden platform, a hardy pioneer among the moderns.

Business had strayed from the railroad track; it had left the station, the freighthouse, the company corral, and some open sheds, to establish its enterprises one block southward. There, fringing a wide, unpaved street that ran east and west, parallel with the gleaming steel rails, Business reared its citadels.

Willets buildings were not imposing. One-story frames predominated, with here and there a two-storied structure, or a brick aristocrat seeming to call attention to its substantial solidity.

Willets had plenty of space in which to grow, and the location of the buildings on their sites, seemed to indicate that their builders appreciated the fact that there was no need for crowding. Between each building was space, suggestive of the unending plains that surrounded the town. Willets sat, serene in its space and solitude, unhurried, uncramped, sprawling over a stretch of grass level—a dingy, dirty, inglorious Willets, shamed by its fringe of tin cans, empty bottles, and other refuse—and by the clean sweep of sand and sage and grass that stretched to its very doors. For Willets was man-made.

From the second story of a brick building that stood

on the southern side of the street, facing the station, Gary Warden could look past the red station into the empty corrals beside the railroad track. Jim Lefingwell, Warden's predecessor, had usually smiled when he saw the corral comfortably filled with steers. But Gary Warden smiled because the corral was empty.

Warden was standing beside a flat-topped desk at one of his office windows. Warden was big, though not massive. He seemed to have the frame of a tall, slender man, and had he stayed slender he might have carried his flesh gracefully. But Warden had lived well, denying himself nothing, and the flesh which had been added had formed in flabby bunches, drooping his shoulders, sagging his jaws, swelling the back of his neck.

And yet Warden was not old; he had told some new-made friends in Willets that he was thirty-five. But he looked older, for a certain blasé sophistication that shone from his eyes and sat on the curves of his lips, did much to create the impression of past maturity.

Warden dressed well. He was coatless, but he wore a shirt of some soft, striped material, with a loose, comfortable-looking collar and a neat bow tie. His hair was short, with bristles in the roll of fat at the back of his neck; while at his forehead it was punctiliously parted, and plastered down with precision.

Warden was not alone. At another window, her elbows on the sill, her hands crossed, her chin resting on the knuckles of the upper one, sat a woman.

She was young, slender, lissom. There was grace in every line of her, and witchery in the eyes that

watched Warden with a steady gaze. She too, was hatless, seemingly conscious of the beauty of her hair, which was looped and twisted into glistening strands that fell over her temples and the back of her neck.

As she watched Warden, who was smiling at the empty corral, she withdrew her elbows from the window-sill, twisted around, so that she faced Warden, and idly twirled the felt hat that she took from her lap.

"Does something please you, Gary?" she asked with slight, bantering emphasis.

Warden's smile broadened. "Well, I'm not exactly displeased."

"With Willets—and the rest of it?"

"With that corral—over there." He pointed.

"Why, it's empty!"

"That's why."

"Why you are pleased! That is odd. As a buyer, I should think you would be more pleased if the corral were full—had cows in it. That is what you are here for, isn't it?"

"Yes," grinned Warden; "to keep it empty until it is filled with steers at my price."

"Oh, bother!" The woman yawned. "I am glad it is you and not I who is to deal with these clod-hoppers. I should turn sour—or laugh myself to death."

"Getting tired of it already, Della?"

"Dreadfully tired, Gary. If I could see one interesting person, or a good-looking man with whom I could flirt——"

"Don't forget our engagement, Della," warned Warden.

She laughed, shooting a mischievous glance at him. "Oh, it would be harmless, I assure you — mere moral exercise. Do you imagine I could lose my heart to one of these sagebrush denizens?"

"Not you, Della," grinned Warden; "that isn't your style."

The girl yawned again, and got to her feet, smoothing her ruffled skirts. Then she walked to a mirror on a wall near the door, and spent some time placing the felt hat on her head at a precise angle, making certain that the coils of hair under it were arranged in the most effective manner. She tucked a stray wisp into the mass at the nape of her neck, patted the glistening coils so that they bulged a little more — smiling with smooth serenity at the reflection in the glass.

"Well, good-bye, Gary. I left Aunt Hannah at Corwin's store. She'll be afraid I've eloped with you. No," she added, as Warden advanced toward her; "no kisses now. I'll look in again before we leave town."

She opened the door, and as it closed she flashed a smile at Warden. Then he heard her descending the stairs. He watched the closed door for an instant, frowning disappointedly; then he strode again to one of the front windows, grinning as his gaze rested on the empty corral.

CHAPTER IV

REBELLION

ACCIDENT or design had placed the schoolhouse at the eastern edge of town. The invisible power which creates the schoolhouse seemingly takes no account of time or place. It comes, unheralded, unsung, and squats in the place where the invisible power has placed it, and instantly becomes as indispensable as the ungainly youth that occupies it.

All youth is not ungainly. Ruth Hamlin was considering the negative proposition as she stood on the little platform in front of the blackboard just before noon, calmly scrutinizing the faces of the score of pupils who composed her "class."

About half of her pupils, she decided, were worthy of the affection she had bestowed upon them. The remainder were ungrateful, incorrigible hoodlums. There had been times when Ruth wondered if the task of teaching was worth while.

A good teacher must not be vindictive; and Ruth was trying her best to keep alive the spark of mercy and compassion that threatened to burn itself out.

Despite her apparent calm—the outward sign of cold self-control — Ruth's face revealed indications of the terrific struggle that was going on within her. Her face was pale, and though her eyes seemed to smile, there was a gleam far back in them that suggested

thoughts of force, instant, vicious. Also there was wrath in them — wrath that threatened to break with volcanic fury.

The girl was of medium height, and yet she seemed to be almost tall as she stood on the platform. She was erect, her head was held high. She was slender, with a gracefully rounded figure, but as she stood there, her muscles straining, her chest swelling with the passion she was trying to suppress, she must have appeared Amazonic to the culprits whose crimes had goaded her to thoughts of corporal punishment.

It was not difficult to single out the culprits. There were two, and they sat defiantly in their seats, sneering their contempt of the teacher's wrath, advertising their entire disregard for the restraining influence of rules.

Both were boys. The larger, freckle-faced, with an uptilted nose and belligerent eyes, was fully as tall as Ruth. He was broad and muscular, and it was evident that consideration for his size was one influence that had thus far delayed the punishment he no doubt merited.

It was evident, too, that the culprit suspected this, for as Ruth's hesitation continued he grew bolder and more contemptuous. And now, having divined that Ruth would not attempt to inflict the punishment she meditated, the young man guffawed loudly.

"Shucks," he sneered, winking piratically at his brother-culprit; "she's tryin' to run a whizzer in on us. She ain't goin' to do *nuthin!*"

"Jimmy Singleton; you advance to the platform!"

Ruth's voice came sharply, quavering with the passion she had been suppressing until now.

She stood rigid until "Jimmy" got out of his seat with elephantine deliberation, and shuffled to the edge of the platform, where he stood, grinning defiantly.

Ruth raised the lid of her desk and took out a formidable willow branch, which she had cut only the day before from a tree that grew beside the Wolf near her cabin, in anticipation of the present incident.

She had known for many days that she would have to punish Jimmy Singleton, for Jimmy had been growing daily less amenable to discipline. But she had hoped that she would not be compelled to punish him —she had escaped that disagreeable task so far.

But there was no alternative, and though she grew deadly white and her legs grew weak as she drew out the willow switch, she advanced on Jimmy, her eyes flaming with desperate resolution.

As she reached Jimmy's side, he lunged toward her. He struck viciously at her with his fist, the blow landing on her shoulder near the neck. It had been aimed at her face, but she had somehow dodged it. The force of the blow brought Jimmy against her, and he seized her around the waist and attempted to throw her. She brought the switch down sharply on Jimmy's legs as they struggled, and the sting of the blow enraged the boy. He deliberately wrenched himself loose; then leaped forward, swinging his arms viciously.

He had not struck the girl fairly, but she was in a daze from the rapid movement, and she was not aware of what was going on around her, centering all her

energy in an attempt to keep the boy from striking her face.

But she suddenly became conscious that a big form had loomed close to her; she heard a deep, angry voice saying:

"I'll attend to you—you young pirate!"

And then Jimmy was jerked backward, away from her; and she saw Kane Lawler standing not more than two or three paces from her. His right hand was twisted in Jimmy's collar; and there was an expression of cold rage on his face—despite the smile he gave her when she looked at him—that chilled her.

But she made no objection when Lawler walked to a chair that stood on the platform, dragging the now protesting Jimmy after him by the scruff of the neck. There was something of majestic deliberation in Lawler's movements, she thought, as he seated himself in the chair and placed the struggling Jimmy across his knees.

Ruth had never entertained a bloodthirsty thought, but her passions were very near that point when she saw Lawler's large, capable right hand begin to descend upon Jimmy's anatomy. She gasped at first, at Lawler's temerity; and then she stepped back and watched him, her heart singing with approval.

Lawler's capable right hand descended many times with a force that brought dismal howls from the unlucky culprit—so many times and with such force that the girl began to fear that Jimmy would be fatally injured. Jimmy likewise entertained that fear, for his howls grew more shrill, laden with mingled terror and

pain, until the piercing appeal of them sent the other pupils out of their seats and into the open shouting that Jimmy was being "killed."

Then, just when Ruth decided to protest, Lawler swung Jimmy around and placed him upright upon the platform. What Lawler said to Jimmy, Ruth did not hear, so low was his voice. But she heard Jimmy's reply, as did some of the children who still lingered outside the door:

"You've walloped me, damn you; you've walloped me!"

Jimmy ran frenziedly to the door, plainly in fear that he would be "walloped" again if he did not make his escape; and when he reached the door he shrieked through unmanly tears:

"My paw will wallop you; you locoed maverick—you see if he don't!"

Jimmy vanished. There was no doubt in Lawler's mind, nor in Ruth's, that he had gone to relate his trouble to his "paw;" and that "paw" would presently appear to exact the lurid punishment Jimmy desired.

But thoughts of imminent punishment were not in Lawler's mind as he faced Ruth. There was nothing but humorous concern in his eyes and voice.

"Did he hurt you, Ruth?"

"I—I think not," she smiled; "but I have no doubt that he would have thrashed me soundly if you hadn't come when you did. I am sorry it happened, but I just *had* to discipline him. He was setting a bad example for the other pupils."

"Teaching school isn't the best job in the world, is it?"

"Decidedly not!" She looked quickly at Lawler, for something in his voice hinted of subtlety; and when she saw his eyes agleam with the whimsical humor that was always in them when he spoke of his hope of winning her, she knew that he had attacked her obliquely.

Her cheeks flushed, and she drooped her shining eyes from his, murmuring low:

"But I am going to keep at it for the present, Kane."

"I was hoping —" he began. But he paused when she shook her head.

"Is that what you rode to town for?" she asked.

"That's the big reason," he returned. "The other is that I'm here to sell Gary Warden my cattle."

"I don't like Gary Warden!" she declared.

His eyes twinkled. "I've heard that before — two or three times. By the time I see him I'll be disliking him, myself."

The class, Ruth now noted, had departed — undoubtedly to follow Jimmy Singleton; or perhaps seizing the opportunity so suddenly presented to play truant. At all events the school was deserted except for themselves.

But Ruth did not seem to mind, nor did Lawler express any regret for the absence of an audience. He grinned widely at Ruth.

"You'll not get them back today, I reckon. If you're riding back home I'd be pleased to ——"

"But you have business with Gary Warden!" she reminded him.

"That can wait. Blackburn won't have the herd here until tomorrow."

Her eyes were glowing with pleasure, and the faint flush on her face betrayed her still more. But she looked at him resolutely.

"I shall stay the day out, whether the children come back or not," she said. "And you must not permit me to interfere with business."

It cost her something to tell him that, for the lure of him had seized her long ago — during the first days of their acquaintance, in fact — and she was deliberately refusing the happiness that was offered her — because she could not confess her father's crimes to this man, and because she would not marry him unless he knew.

And not even then, perhaps. For she knew something of Lawler's high ideals, the rugged honesty of him, his straightforwardness and his hatred for the thieves who stole cattle — thieves like her father. She couldn't marry him, feeling that each time he looked at her she must feel that he would be thinking of the misdeeds of her parent. That would be unbearable.

He took a step, and stood beside her, looking down at her gravely. He took one of her hands, she permitting it, lifting her eyes to his as he drew the hand toward him. The hand lay inertly in his left; he covered it with his right and held it thus in a warm, firm grip. Then he met her eyes, his own swimming with a gentleness that made her draw a slow, deep breath of wonder.

This minute had been anticipated by both of them; for many months, when they had stood close together,

they had felt the imminence of surrender to the longing that dwelt in both of them.

But the girl resisted, as she had resisted many times. Her breath came rapidly, and the captive hand trembled as she tried to withdraw it.

"No; not now, Kane!" she protested; "not now — please!"

Lawler laughed lowly, and held the hand for an instant longer, while he compelled the girl's eyes to meet his.

"All right," he said; "not now. But the time will come. Something is worrying you, Ruth. But you don't trust me enough to tell me what it is. Some day — when you discover that nothing but your love means anything to me; when you realize that I love you enough to take you in spite of the thing that worries you — you'll tell me. And then we'll forget it."

He stepped back, releasing her hand, for he had heard a commotion outside — Jimmy's voice, high-pitched, carrying a note of savage triumph; and the voices of the other pupils in a shrill murmur, coming closer.

Ruth started, clenched her hands and backed to the desk, where she stood, her eyes wide, her breath coming fast, a picture of apprehension and dismay.

Her big eyes went to Lawler, who grinned faintly at her.

"I reckon Jimmy's coming with his 'paw,'" he said.

A big man, massive, muscular, with heavy shoulders that seemed to droop with the weight of his great, long arms, stepped into the room.

The man's head was big, like the rest of him, and covered with shaggy, tawny hair which seemed to bristle with truculence. His chin was huge, square, and sagging a little, his lips were in a hideous pout; and his eyes, small, black, with heavy brows that made them seem deep-set, were glittering with passion.

He paused just inside the door, seemingly to accustom his eyes to the subdued light of the room. His long arms were hanging at his sides, the fingers clenching and unclenching close to the heavy pistols he wore — one at each hip. As he stood there, blinking his eyes at Ruth and Lawler, Lawler spoke.

"Come in, Singleton," he said.

Ruth was still standing at the desk. Her arms were now outstretched along it, her hands gripping its edge. She started at the sound of Lawler's voice, amazed at the change that had come in it — wondering how — when it had been so gentle a few minutes before — it could now have in it a quality that made her shudder.

She saw the big man's eyes widen, noted that his shoulders sagged a little when he heard Lawler's voice; observed that there seemed to come an appreciable lessening of the tension of his taut muscles. She marveled that the sound of one man's voice could have so calming an effect upon another — that it could, at a stroke, seemingly, cool the white-hot rage that had seized the man.

But there was no doubt that a change had come over the big man. His shoulders sagged further. A suggestion of a mirthless smile began to tug at the corners of his mouth; he unclenched the fingers of his hands.

"It's you, eh?" he said, gruffly. "My kid was sayin' someone in the schoolhouse had walloped him, an' I was aimin' to find out who it was. I reckon he's gone."

"I walloped him, Singleton."

Lawler's voice was gentle. In it was still a trace of that quality that Ruth had sensed, softened now slightly by the knowledge that Singleton's rage had slightly cooled.

"There isn't a heap to be said, I reckon," Lawler resumed as Singleton stood rigid again. "Your boy was trying to 'wallop' his teacher. I happened to look in, and I had to take a hand in it, just to keep things even. He had it coming to him, Singleton."

Lawler's manner was conciliatory, even mildly placative. "I figured on saving you a job, Singleton."

Singleton's face reddened.

"Lawler, I figger to lick my own kid."

"Singleton, I reckon it can't be undone, and you'll have to make the best of it. You and I have never got along well, but I want you to know I didn't know it was your boy I punished."

"Hell's fire!" snarled Singleton; "what you interferin' in the schoolhouse for? What business you got buttin' in?" It was clear that Singleton's rage was again rising. He must have noticed that the pupils had crowded around the door, and that Jimmy was watching him, no doubt disappointed that the salutary punishment for which he had hoped had been unnecessarily delayed.

Undoubtedly the presence of the children contributed to Singleton's anger; but at bottom was his old dislike

of Lawler — a dislike that the incident of the whipping had increased to hatred.

It was plain that Singleton meditated violence. Yet it was equally plain that he feared Lawler. He never had seen Lawler draw a gun, but he had heard tales of the man's ability with the weapon. There lingered in his mind at this minute — as it had dwelt during all the days he had known Lawler — the knowledge that Lawler's father had been a gunman of wide reputation, and that he had taught his son the precision and swiftness that had made him famous in the deadly art.

That knowledge had always exerted a deterring influence upon Singleton; there had been times when he would have drawn a gun on Lawler had it not been that he feared the son might be as swift as the father.

So Singleton had assured himself; he was not afraid of Lawler, he was afraid of the reputation of Lawler's father. Singleton was reluctant to admit that it was not Lawler's gun that he was afraid of, but something that was in the man himself — in his confident manner, in the level glance of his eyes; in the way he looked at Singleton — seeming to hint that he knew the man's thoughts, and that when the time came — if it ever came — he would convince Singleton that his fears were well founded.

And, singularly, Singleton knew it; he knew that if he drew his gun on Lawler, Lawler would anticipate the movement; Singleton had become convinced of it — the conviction had become an obsession. That was why his rage had cooled so suddenly when he had entered the schoolroom.

But he knew, too, that Lawler never sought trouble; that within the past few years — or since Singleton had known him — he had never drawn the gun that reposed at his hip. And that knowledge brought the rage surging back into Singleton's veins. He knew he could *talk* to Lawler; that he could say some of the things that were in his mind — that had been in his mind all along; and that he would be safe so long as he kept his hands away from his guns.

As he snarled his questions at Lawler he took a step toward him. His eyes were truculent again, his lips in the pout that had been on them when he had entered. If Lawler didn't go for his gun he need have no fear of him. For he was bigger than Lawler, stronger. And if he could goad Lawler into using his fists instead of the dreaded gun he had no doubt of the outcome.

"Singleton," replied Lawler, answering the questions that had been hurled at him; "what I am here for is my business. I don't feel a heap like explaining it."

"Business — bah!" sneered Singleton. "I reckon the business that brought you here could be carried on better with no kids around."

Singleton saw a pin point of fire glow in Lawler's eyes. But he noted with venomous satisfaction that Lawler's hand did not move upward the slightest fraction of an inch toward his gun, and he laughed discordantly, taking another step toward Lawler, so that he would be close enough to strike when the time came.

"Lawler," he said, sticking his face close to the other's, his eyes glittering with the malignant triumph that had seized him over the conviction that Lawler

would not try to draw his gun; "I'm figgerin' on wallopin' you like you walloped my kid. Understand? I'm aimin' to make you fight—with your fists. I'm goin' to knock hell out of you!"

Lawler had not moved. Had Singleton not been so obsessed with thoughts of an easy victory he might have noted that the pin point of fire that had glowed in Lawler's eyes had grown larger, and that his muscles had stiffened. Also, had Singleton been observant at this minute he must have seen a faint grin on Lawler's lips.

"Hell's fire!" snarled Singleton; "won't anything make you fight! There's that girl there—Ruth Hamlin. You think she's got a right to be proud as she is. Lawler, you don't know her; you don't know what's goin' on over there at the Two Bar—Hamlin's ranch. This here school teachin' of hers is only a blind—a blind, I tell you! A blind for other things that her an'——"

Ruth's sharp, protesting cry was drowned in a sodden swish as Lawler struck. His fist had shot upward with the weight of his body behind it, landing fairly on the point of Singleton's chin, snapping his teeth shut with a clack.

Singleton's head went back, his body rose from the floor. He came down with his knees unjointed, his head sagging on his chest; came down in a heap and tumbled forward upon his face, his arms limp, the fingers slowly spreading.

For an instant Lawler stood over him, pale, his eyes agleam. Then when Singleton did not move he turned to Ruth, smiling faintly.

"Go home, now, Ruth, before this beast comes to life. Go out and send the children away. I've got something to say to Singleton."

Ruth looked intently at him, saw there would be no use of pleading with him, and walked to the door, dragging the children away from it, telling them to go home.

Jimmy Singleton, terrorized by the thing that had happened to his father, needed no urging. He ran, whimpering, toward town, the other children following.

Ruth went to the shed where she kept her pony, threw saddle and bridle on him and led him to the step, where she usually mounted.

The door of the schoolhouse was closed. Trailing the reins over the pony's head, she ran to one of the windows — a small one in the center of the side wall, dust-begrimmed, with one pane of glass missing.

Peering within, she saw Singleton sitting up, staring dazedly around, supporting himself with his hands, an expression of almost laughable bewilderment on his face.

Lawler was standing near him — big, stern, seeming to wait for Singleton to rise before he spoke to him.

And while Ruth watched, Singleton staggered to his feet. He swayed uncertainly as he faced Lawler; and when Lawler advanced toward him he cringed and staggered back, raising one arm as though to ward off an expected blow.

Ruth heard his voice; it was a whine, tremulous with fear.

"Don't hit me again, Lawler; I wasn't meanin' anything!"

And then Ruth saw that Singleton must have been struck a second time, for high up on his left cheek was a huge gash that had suffused his chin and neck with blood. She remembered that while saddling and bridling her pony she had heard a sound from within the schoolhouse, but she had thought then that it must have been Lawler moving a chair. Plainly, Singleton had recovered from the first blow, and had received another.

Lawler's voice again reached her. It was low, vibrant with passion.

"Singleton, I ought to kill you. I will kill you if you ever tell that girl that you know her father is a rustler. Damn your hide, she knows it now — and it's breaking her heart!

"I'm warning you. Don't you ever go near the Two Bar again. Don't you ever buy another steer from Hamlin. Don't even speak to him. I'll kill you sure as hell if you do!"

Ruth reeled away from the window. She got on her pony somehow, taking care to make no sound, for she did not want Lawler to know that she had heard. Once on the pony she sent the little animal rapidly away, toward the Two Bar — away from Lawler and from that happiness for which she had hoped despite the hideous knowledge which for months had tortured her.

Inside the schoolhouse Singleton was standing, beaten by the man over whom he had thought to triumph easily; by a man whose pallid face and blazing eyes con-

veyed to Singleton something of the terrible power and energy of him when aroused.

Singleton did not think of his guns, now; he was aware of nothing but the great awe that had seized him. And as Lawler watched, saying nothing more, Singleton turned from him and slunk out through the door.

CHAPTER V

A MAN'S WORD

WHEN Lawler finally emerged from the schoolhouse door there was no one about. Far down the street, in front of a building, he saw a group of children. Lawler recognized the building as the Wolf Saloon—so named because of the river that ran through the town. He had no doubt that Singleton had entered the building—that would explain the presence of the children in front of it.

But Lawler merely glanced toward town; he turned instantly and gazed long into the great stretch of plain that ran eastward. He caught sight of a dot on his right, so far away that it was dim in the haze of distance, and he knew Ruth had followed his advice.

Lawler watched the dot until it vanished, and when he turned again—to mount Red King—his color had returned, though something of the mighty passion that had gripped him was still swimming in his eyes.

He sent Red King into town at a slow lope, not even looking toward the Wolf as he passed it, but hearing subdued voices that seemed to die away as he drew close.

He brought Red King to a halt in front of the brick building in which Gary Warden had his office, dismounted, tied the horse to a hitching rail and strode to an open doorway from which ran the stairs that led

to the second floor. A gilt sign on the open door advised him of the location of Warden's office.

With one foot on the stairs, ready to ascend, Lawler heard a woman's voice, floating downward, coming from the landing above:

"Well, good-bye Gary," said the voice; "I'll see you tonight."

Lawler heard a man's voice answering, the words unintelligible to him; then the woman laughed, banteringly.

Then came the sound of a door closing, and the light tread of a woman's foot on the stairs.

Lawler had halted when he heard the woman's voice; he now stepped back in the narrow hallway, against the open door, to give the woman room to pass him.

Turning his back to the stairs, unconcernedly waiting, subconsciously realizing that the woman was descending, he gazed past the station building to see the empty corrals on the other side of the railroad track. His eyes narrowed with satisfaction — for there would be room for the thousand head of cattle that Blackburn and the other men of the Circle L outfit would bring to Willets in the morning. There would be no delay, and no camp on the edge of town, awaiting the emptying of the corral.

When he heard the woman's step on the bottom of the stairs he turned and faced her. She was looking straight at him, and as their eyes met he saw hers widen eloquently. She half paused as she started to pass him, and it seemed to him that she was about to speak. He smiled gravely, puzzled, hesitant, for her manner

indicated that she knew him, or was mistaking him for another. He paused also, and both stood for a fleeting instant face to face, silent.

Lawler noted that the woman was beautiful, well dressed, with a manner unmistakably eastern. He decided that she had mistaken him for someone of her acquaintance, for he felt assured he never had seen her before. He bowed, saying lowly:

"I beg your pardon, ma'am; I reckon it's a case of mistaken identity."

"Why," she returned, laughing; "I thought sure I knew you. Are you quite certain that I don't?"

There was guile in her eyes; so far back that he could not see it, or so cleverly veiled with something else that he was not aware of it. It seemed to him that the eyes were merely engaging, and frankly curious. He did not see the admiration in them, the elation, and the demure coquetry.

"I reckon you'll have to be the judge of that, ma'am. You certainly have the advantage of me."

"You are—" Her pause was eloquent.

"I am Kane Lawler, ma'am."

He looked into her eyes for the disappointment he expected to find there, and saw only eager interrogation.

"Oh, then I don't know you. I beg your pardon."

"I reckon there's no harm done," smiled Lawler.

He bowed again, noting that she looked intently at him, her eyes still wide and filled with something he could not fathom. And when halfway up the stairs he looked back, curious, subtly attracted to the woman,

he saw her standing in the doorway, ready to go out, watching him over her shoulder. He laughed and opened the door of Gary Warden's office.

Warden was sitting at his desk. He turned at the sound of the door opening, and faced Lawler inquiringly.

Perhaps in Lawler's eyes there still remained a trace of the cold passion that had seized him in the schoolhouse; it may have been that what Lawler had heard of Gary Warden was reflected in his gaze — a doubt of Warden's honorableness. Or perhaps in Lawler's face he observed signs which told him that before him stood a man of uncommon character.

At any rate, Warden was conscious of a subtle pulse of antagonism; a quick dislike — and jealousy.

Warden could not have told what had aroused the latter emotion, though he was subconsciously aware that it had come when he had noted the rugged, manly strength of Lawler's face; that the man was attractive, and that he admired him despite his dislike.

That knowledge aroused a dull rage in him. His cheeks flushed, his eyes glowed with it.

But Warden's smile contradicted his thoughts. He managed that so cleverly that many men, watching him, might have been deceived.

In Lawler's keen eyes, however, glowed understanding — a knowledge of Warden's character that vindicated the things he had heard about the man — the tentative suggestions that Warden was not a worthy successor to Lefingwell.

That knowledge, though, would not have bothered

him, had he not seen in Warden's eyes something that seemed to offer him a personal affront. As quickly as Warden had veiled his eyes from Lawler, the latter had seen the dislike in them, the antagonism, and the rage that had stained his cheeks.

He had come to Warden's office with an open mind; now he looked at the man with a saturnine smile in which there was amused contempt. Assuredly the new buyer did not "measure up" to Jim Lefingwell's "size," as Blackburn had suggested.

Therefore, aware that he could not meet this man on the basis of friendliness that had distinguished all his relations with Jim Lefingwell, Lawler's voice was crisp and businesslike:

"You're Gary Warden?"

At the latter's short, affirmative nod, Lawler continued:

"I'm Kane Lawler, of the Circle L. I've come to make arrangements with you about buying my cattle. I've got eight thousand head—good clean stock. They're above the average, but I'm keeping my word with Jim Lefingwell, and turning them in at the market price."

"That's twenty-five dollars, delivered at the railroad company's corral, in town here."

He looked straight at Lawler, his face expressionless except for the slight smile that tugged at the corners of his mouth—which might have been indicative of vindictiveness or triumph.

"Thirty," smiled Lawler. "That was the price Lefingwell agreed to pay."

Warden appeared to be blandly amused.

"Lefingwell agreed to pay thirty, you say? Well, Lefingwell always was a little reckless. That's why my company asked for his resignation. But if you have a written contract with Lefingwell — in which it appears that Lefingwell acted for the company, why, of course we'll have to take your stock at the contract price. Let me see it, if you please."

"There was no written contract; I had Jim Lefingwell's word — which was all I ever needed."

"Lefingwell's word," smiled Warden. "Unfortunately, a man's word is not conclusive proof."

"Meaning that Jim Lefingwell was lying when he told you he'd agreed to pay thirty dollars for my stock this fall?"

"Oh, no. I don't insinuate against Lefingwell's veracity. But the company requires a written agreement in a case like this — where the former representative ——"

"We won't argue that," interrupted Lawler. "Jim Lefingwell told me he'd had a talk with you about my agreement with him, and Jim said you'd carry it out."

"Mr. Lefingwell did not mention the matter to me."

"I'd hate to think Jim Lefingwell lied to me," said Lawler, slowly.

Warden's face grew crimson. "Meaning that I'm a liar, I suppose," he said, his voice quavering with sudden passion.

Lawler's level gaze made him stiffen in his chair. Lawler's smile, cold and mirthless, brought a pulse of apprehension through him, and Lawler's voice, slow,

clear, and distinct, forced the blood from his face, leaving it pale:

"I don't let any man twist my words so that they mean something I don't intend them to mean, Mister Man. If I intended to call you a liar, I'd have said it to you mighty plain, so there'd be no doubt in your mind about it. So far as I know, you are not a liar. I'm telling you this, though: A man's word in this country has got to be backed by his performances—and he's got to have memory enough to know when he gives his word.

"I reckon that where you come from men give their word without knowing it. Maybe that's what happened to you when Jim Lefingwell spoke to you about his agreement with me. Anyway, I feel that charitable enough toward you to advance that explanation. You can take that for what it seems worth to you. And I won't be bothered any, no matter which way you take it."

Lawler turned toward the door. On the threshold he paused, for Warden's voice reached him.

"You'd better sell at twenty-five, Mr. Lawler."

Warden's voice was low and smooth; he seemed to have decided to accept the "charity" offered him by Lawler. But there was mockery in his voice, and his eyes were alight with cunning. In the atmosphere about him was complacency which suggested that Warden knew exactly what he was doing; that he had knowledge unsuspected by Lawler, and that he had no doubt that, ultimately, Lawler would accept his offer.

"Not a steer at twenty-five," returned Lawler.

"That price means immediate shipment," pursued Warden. "The railroads are having some trouble with their rolling stock — it is hard to get cars. Some shippers are not getting them at all. And the shortage will grow."

"Perhaps it will. I don't blame you for buying as low as you can. That's business, Warden. I heard through Lew Brainard, of the Two Diamond, that owners in the South Basin, over at Shotwell, were offered forty just before the round-up. I was kicking myself for making that agreement with Lefingwell at thirty. But I intended to keep my word with him. But I feel mighty free, now, to sell where I can get the market price."

"Twenty-five is the market price," said Warden. "Just before the round-up there was some nervousness, it is true; and some buyers were offering forty — and they contracted for some at that price. But that was before we made —" He hesitated, reddened, and then went on quickly, plainly embarrassed, endeavoring to conceal his embarrassment by lighting a cigar.

"It was before the market broke," he went on. "The market is glutted. The West raised more cattle this season than ever before. There is no demand and the price had to tumble. A good many cattle owners will be glad to take twenty, and even fifteen, before long."

"But if there are no cars?" smiled Lawler.

Again he saw Warden's face redden.

"A shortage of cars would mean a shortage of cattle in the East, I reckon," went on Lawler. "And a

shortage of cattle would mean higher prices for those that got through. But I'm not arguing—nor am I accepting twenty-five for my cattle. I reckon I'll have to ship my stock East."

"Well, I wish you luck," said Warden.

He turned his back to Lawler, bending over his desk.

Something in his voice—a hint of mockery tempered with rage—brought Lawler to a pause as he crossed the threshold of the doorway. He turned and looked back at Warden, puzzled, for it seemed to him that Warden was defying him; and he seemed to feel the atmosphere of complacence that surrounded the man. His manner hinted of secret knowledge—strongly; it gave Lawler an impression of something stealthy, clandestine. Warden's business methods were not like Lefingwell's. Lefingwell had been bluff, frank, and sincere; there was something in Warden's manner that seemed to exude craft and guile. The contrast between the two men was sharp, acute, startling; and Lawler descended the stairs feeling that he had just been in contact with something that crept instead of walking upright like a man.

A recollection of the woman he had met at the foot of the stairs came to Lawler as he descended, and thought of her did much to erase the impression he had gained of Warden. He grinned, thinking of how he had caught her watching him as he had mounted the stairs. And then he reddened as he realized that he would not have known she was watching him had he not turned to look back at her.

He found himself wondering about her—why she

had been in Warden's office, and who she could be. And then he remembered his conversation with Blackburn, about "chapper-owns," and he decided she must be that woman to whom Blackburn had referred as "a woman at Lefingwell's old place, keepin' Warden company." He frowned, and crossed the street, going toward the railroad station building, in which he would find the freight agent.

And as he walked he was considering another contrast—that afforded by his glimpse of the strange woman and Ruth Hamlin. And presently he found himself smiling with pleasure, with a mental picture of Ruth's face before him—her clear, direct-looking, honest eyes, with no guile in them like that which had glowed in the eyes that had gazed into his at the foot of the stairs.

Over in Corwin's store, where "Aunt Hannah," had gone to make some small purchases, the woman who had encountered Lawler in the hall was talking with the proprietor. Aunt Hannah was watching a clerk.

"Della," she called; "do you want anything?"

"Nothing, Aunty," returned the woman. Then she lowered her voice, speaking to Corwin:

"So he owns the Circle L? Is that a large ranch?"

"One of the biggest in the Wolf River section," declared Corwin.

"Then Lawler must be wealthy."

"I reckon he's got wads of dust, ma'am."

The woman's eyes glowed with satisfaction.

"Well," she said; "I was just curious about him. He is a remarkably striking-looking man, isn't he?"

"You've hit it, ma'am," grinned Corwin. "I've been years tryin' to think up a word that would fit him. You've hit it. He's different. Looks like one of them statesmen with cowpuncher duds on — like a governor or somethin', which is out of place here."

The woman smiled affirmation. "So he does," she said, reflectively. "He is big, and imposing, and strikingly handsome. And he is educated, too, isn't he?"

"I reckon he is," said Corwin. "Privately, that is. His maw was a scholar of some kind back East, before she married Luke Lawler an' come out here to live with him. Luke's dead, now — died five years ago. Luke was a wolf, ma'am, with a gun. He could shoot the buttons off your coat with his eyes shut. An' he was so allfired fast with his gun that he'd make a streak of lightnin' look like it was loafin'. Luke had a heap of man in him, ma'am, an' Kane is just as much of a man as his dad was, I reckon. Luke was ——"

"About Kane Lawler," interrupted the woman. "You say he is well educated?"

"That's about the only thing I've got ag'in' him, ma'am. I hold that no cattleman has got a right to know so durned much. It's mighty dangerous — to his folks — if he ever gets any. Now take Kane Lawler. If he was to marry a girl that wasn't educated like him, an' he'd begin to get fool notions about hisself — why, it'd make it pretty hard for the girl to get along with him." He grinned. "But accordin' to what I hear, Kane ain't goin' to marry no ignoramus exactly, for he's took a shine to Ruth Hamlin, Willets' school teacher. She's got a heap of brains, that girl, an' I

reckon she'd lope alongside of Kane, wherever he went."

The woman frowned. "Is Mr. Lawler going to marry Ruth Hamlin?"

Corwin looked sharply at her. "What do you suppose he's fannin' up to her for?" he demanded. "Neither of them is a heap flighty, I reckon. An' Kane will marry her if she'll have him — accordin' to the way things generally go."

The woman smiled as she left Corwin and joined the older woman at the front of the store. She smiled as she talked with the other woman, and she smiled as they both walked out of the store and climbed into a buckboard. The smile was one that would have puzzled Corwin, for it was inscrutable, baffling. Only one thing Corwin might have seen in it — determination. And that might have puzzled him, also.

CHAPTER VI

THE INVISIBLE POWER

JAY SIMMONS, the freight agent, was tilted comfortably in a chair near a window looking out upon the railroad platform when Lawler stepped into the office. The office was on the second floor, and from a side window the agent had seen Lawler coming toward the station from Warden's office. He had been sitting near the side window, but when he saw Lawler approaching the station he had drawn his chair to one of the front windows. And now, apparently, he was surprised to see Lawler, for when the latter opened the door of the office Simmons exclaimed, with assumed heartiness:

"Well, if it ain't Kane Lawler!"

Simmons was a rotund man, bald, with red hair that had a faded, washed-out appearance. His eyes were large, pale blue in color, with a singularly ingratiating expression which was made almost yearning by light, colorless lashes.

Simmons' eyes, however, were unreliable as an index to his character. One could not examine very far into them. They seemed to be shallow, baffling. Simmons did not permit his eyes to betray his thoughts. He used them as masks to hide from prying eyes the things that he did not wish others to see.

"Come a-visitin', Lawler?" asked Simmons as Law-

ler halted midway in the room and smiled faintly at the greeting he received.

"Not exactly, Simmons."

"Not exactly, eh? I reckon that means you've got some business. I'll be glad to help you out — if I can."

"I'm going to ship my stock East, Simmons, and I'm wanting cars for them — eight thousand head."

Simmons still sat in the chair beside the window. He now pursed his lips, drew his brows together and surveyed Lawler attentively.

"Eight thousand head, eh? Sort of whooped 'em up this season, didn't you. I reckon Gary Warden took 'em all?"

"Warden and I couldn't get together. I'm shipping them East, myself."

"Consignin' 'em to who?"

"They'll go to Legget and Mellert."

"H'm; they're an independent concern, ain't they?"

"Yes; that's the firm my father shipped to before Jim Lefingwell opened an office here."

Simmons locked his fingers together and squinted his eyes at Lawler.

"H'm," he said. Then he was silent, seemingly meditating. Then he shook his head slowly from side to side. Apparently he was gravely considering a problem and could find no solution for it.

He cleared his throat, looked at Lawler, then away from him.

"I reckon it's goin' to be a lot bothersome to ship that bunch of stock, Lawler — a heap bothersome. There's been half a dozen other owners in to see me

within the last week or so, an' I couldn't give them no encouragement. There ain't an empty car in the state."

Lawler was watching him intently, and the expression in his eyes embarrassed Simmons. He flushed, cleared his throat again, and then shot a belligerent glance at Lawler.

"It ain't my fault—not a bit of it, Lawler. I've been losin' sleep over this thing—losin' sleep, I tell you! I've telegraphed every damned point on the line. This road is swept clean as a whistle. 'No cars' they wire back to me—'no cars!' I've read that answer until there ain't no room for anything else in my brain.

"The worst of it is, I'm gettin' blamed for it. You'd think I was runnin' the damned railroad—that I was givin' orders to the president. Lem Caldwell, of the Star, over to Keegles, was in here yesterday, threatenin' to herd ride me if I didn't have a hundred cars here this day, week. He'd been to see Gary Warden—the same as you have—an' he was figgerin' on playin' her independent. An' some more owners have been in. I don't know what in hell the company is thinkin' of—no cars, an' the round-up just over."

Simmons had worked himself into a near frenzy. His face had become bloated with passion, he was breathing fast. But Lawler noted that his eyes were shifty, that he turned them everywhere except upon Lawler.

Simmons now paused, seemingly having exhausted his breath.

"I've just left Gary Warden," said Lawler, slowly. "He offered his price for my stock. He told me if I

accepted, it meant there would be no delay, that they would be shipped immediately. Warden seems to know where he can get cars."

Simmons' face reddened deeply, the flush suffusing his neck and ears. He shot one swift glance at Lawler, and then looked down. In that swift glance, however, Lawler had seen a fleeting gleam of guilt, of insincerity.

Lawler laughed shortly—a sound that made Simmons shoot another swift glance at him.

"How is it that Gary Warden figures on getting cars, Simmons?" said Lawler.

Simmons got up, his face flaming with rage.

"You're accusin' me of holdin' somethin' back, eh? You're callin' me a liar! You're thinkin' I'm ——"

"Easy, there, Simmons."

There was a chill in Lawler's voice that brought Simmons rigid with a snap—as though he had suddenly been drenched with cold water. The flush left his face; he drew a deep, quick breath; then stood with open mouth, watching Lawler.

"Simmons," said the latter; "it has been my experience that whenever a man is touchy about his veracity, he will bear watching. You and Gary Warden have both flared up from the same spark. I don't know whether this thing has been framed up or not. But it looks mighty suspicious. It is the first time there has been a lack of cars after a round-up. Curiously, the lack of cars is coincident with Gary Warden's first season as a buyer of cattle.

"I don't say that you've got anything to do with it, but it's mighty plain you know something about it.

I'm not asking you to tell what you know, because if there is a frame-up, it's a mighty big thing, and you are about as important a figure in it as a yellow coyote in a desert. I reckon that's all, Simmons. You can tell your boss that Kane Lawler says he can go to hell."

He wheeled, crossed the floor, went out of the room and left the door open behind him. Simmons could hear his step on the stairs. Then Simmons sat down again, drew a big red bandanna handkerchief from a hip pocket and wiped some big beads of perspiration from his forehead. He was breathing fast, and his face was mottled with purple spots. He got up, ran to a side window, and watched Lawler until the latter vanished behind a building opposite Gary Warden's office.

Again Simmons mopped his brow. And now he drew a breath of relief.

"Whew!" he said, aloud; "I'm glad that's over. I've been dreadin' it. He's the only one in the whole bunch that I was afraid of. An' he's wise. There'll be hell in this section, now—pure, unadulterated hell, an' no mistake!"

CHAPTER VII

THE COALITION

WHEN Lawler reached Willets' one street he saw a buckboard drawn by two gray horses. The vehicle was headed west, away from him, and the horses were walking. The distance between himself and the buckboard was not great, and he saw that it was occupied by two women — one of them the woman whom he had met at the foot of the stairs leading to Warden's office. The other was elderly, and was looking straight ahead, but the young woman's head was turned toward Lawler at the instant Lawler caught sight of the buckboard. It seemed to him that the young woman must have been watching him, before he became aware of the buckboard, for there was a smile on her face as she looked at him; and when she seemed sure that he was looking she gayly waved a white handkerchief.

Lawler did not answer the signal. He looked around, thinking that perhaps the woman might have waved the handkerchief at some friend she had just left, and when he turned she had her back to him.

Lawler was conscious of a pulse of amusement over the woman's action, though he experienced no fatuous thrill. The woman was frivolous, and had made no appeal to his imagination.

Besides, Lawler was in no mood for frivolous

thought. He was having his first experience with the invisible and subtle power that ruled the commerce of the nation, and his thoughts were serious—almost vicious.

Somewhere a mighty hand had halted activity in the Wolf River section; a power, stealthy, sinister, had interfered with the business in which he was vitally interested, interrupting it, disturbing it.

Lawler had kept himself well informed. In the big library at the Circle L were various volumes relating to economics that had been well thumbed by him. He had been privately educated, by his mother. And among the books that lined the shelves of the library were the philosophers, ancient and modern; the masters of art, science, and letters, and a miscellany of authorities on kindred subjects.

When his father had insisted that he be educated he had studied the political history of his state; he had kept a serious eye upon the activities of all the politicians of note; he had kept his mind open and free from party prejudice. He knew that the present governor of the state was incapable, or swayed by invisible and malign influences. He was aware that the state railroad commissioner lacked aggressiveness, or that he had been directed to keep in the background. And he was also aware that for a year or more the people of the state had regretted electing the present governor; the dissatisfaction manifesting itself in various ways, though chiefly in the tone of the editorials published by the newspapers in the towns.

As the average newspaper editor endeavors to antic-

ipate public opinion he invariably keeps himself well informed concerning the activities of an office-holder, that he may be prepared to campaign against him at the instant he detects dissatisfaction among his subscribers. And the present governor was being scathingly arraigned by the newspapers of the state, while he sat in smug complacence in his office at the capital. He had made no effort to correct some of the evils of government about which he had raged just before the election.

Lawler smiled with grim amusement as he walked toward the Willets Hotel — where he meant to stay overnight. For he was convinced that the car shortage could not exist if the state officials — especially the railroad commissioner — would exert authority to end it. It seemed to Lawler that there must exist a secret understanding between the railroad commissioner and the invisible power represented by Gary Warden. And he wondered at the temerity of the governor — the sheer, brazen disregard for the public welfare that permitted him to become leagued with the invisible power in an effort to rob the cattle owners of the state. He must certainly know that he had been elected by the cattle owners — that their votes and the votes of their employees had made it possible for him to gain the office he had sought.

But perhaps — and Lawler's lips curved with bitterness — the governor wanted only one term. For two years of complete and absolute control of the cattle industry of the state would make him wealthy enough to hold public opinion in contempt.

From a window of his office Gary Warden had watched Lawler go into the station building. And from the same window Warden saw Lawler emerge. He watched Lawler, noting the gravity of his face, exulting, smiling mockingly. Warden also noted the little drama of the fluttering handkerchief, and the smile went out and a black, jealous rage seized him.

However, Gary Warden and Jay Simmons were not the only persons in town who watched Lawler. When he had entered town the school children who had preceded him had watched him from in front of the Wolf; and half a dozen lean-faced, rugged, and prosperous-looking men had watched him from the lounging-room of the Willets Hotel.

The men in the lounging-room were watching Lawler now, as he walked toward the building, for they seemed to divine that he would enter.

When Lawler stepped over the threshold his lips were set in stern, serious lines and his brows were drawn together in a frown. For his thoughts were dwelling upon the sinister power that threatened to create confusion in the section.

He did not see the men in the lounging-room until he had taken several steps toward the desk; and then he glanced carelessly toward them. Instantly his eyes glowed with recognition; he walked toward them.

"Howdy, Lawler," greeted one, extending a hand. And, "howdy," was the word that passed the lips of the others as Lawler shook hands with them. He called them all by name; but it was to the first man that he spoke, after the amenities had been concluded.

"I heard you were in town, Caldwell," he said.

Caldwell — a big man with a black beard, probing, intelligent eyes, and an aggressive chin, grinned grimly.

"Gary Warden tell you?" he asked.

"No. Warden didn't mention you."

"Then it was Jay Simmons. You ain't been anywhere else."

"How do you know?"

Caldwell exchanged glances with his companions. "I reckon we've been watchin' you, Lawler. We seen you ride into town on Red King, an' we seen you go over to the station from Warden's office."

"Watching me?" queried Lawler; "what for?"

"Wall, I reckon we wanted to see how you took it."

"Took what?"

"What Warden an' Simmons had to say to you. We got ours — me yesterday; Barthman an' Littlefield this mornin'; an' Corts, Sigmund, an' Lester the day before yesterday. I reckon the whole section will get it before long. Looks like they're tryin' to squeeze us. How many steers did you sell to Warden at twenty-five?"

Lawler grinned.

"An' Simmons?" said Caldwell, gleefully.

"No cars."

"Seems Simmons ain't makin' no exceptions. We've all heard the same story. We knowed you'd be in, an' we sort of waited around, wonderin' what you'd do about it. We didn't bring no cattle over, for we hadn't made no arrangement with Jim Lefingwell — like you done — an' we didn't want to stampede Warden."

Lawler told them what had occurred in his interview with Warden.

"I reckon Warden's the liar, all right," declared Caldwell; "Jim Lefingwell's word was the only contract anyone ever needed with him." He looked keenly at Lawler. "What you aimin' to do?" he questioned.

"I've been thinking it over," said Lawler.

"You ain't figgerin' to lay down to the cusses?" Caldwell's voice was low and cold.

Lawler looked straight at him, smiling. Caldwell laughed, and the others grinned.

"Lawler, we knowed you wouldn't," declared Caldwell; "but a man's got a right to ask. Right here an' now somethin' has got to be done. Looks to me as if we've got to play this game to a showdown, an' we might as well start right now. They're ain't none of us men goin' to let Gary Warden an' the railroad company run our business; but there's a few owners around here that ain't got no stomach for a fight, an' they'd sell to Warden for ten dollars rather than have any trouble. Them's the guys we've got to talk mighty plain to. For if they go to sellin' for what they can get, they'll make it allfired uncomfortable for us."

"This is a free country, Caldwell. So far as I'm concerned every man runs his own ranch and sells for what he thinks is a fair price. If we go to interfering with them, we'd be as bad as Warden and the railroad company."

"Lawler, you're right," agreed Caldwell, after reflecting a moment. "I didn't realize that, at first. A man don't think, when he's mad clear through.

But it's mighty plain — we've got to stand on our own feet, if we stand at all."

Barthman, a tall, lean-faced man, cleared his throat.

"Lawler, you're the man to handle this thing. You've got the most money, the most brains, an' you're known all over the state — on account of them slick Herefords you've been raisin', an' on account of headin' the delegation to the state convention last fall, from this county. You can talk, for you mighty near stampeded that convention last fall. If you'd said the word you'd have been governor today instead of that dumb coyote which is holdin' down the office now. You've got the reputation an' the backbone — an' they've got to listen to you. I've heard that cattle owners all over the state are gettin' the same deal." Barthman's eyes gleamed with passion. "I propose that you be elected chairman of this meetin', an' that you be instructed to hop on the mornin' train an' go to the railroad commissioner at the capital an' tell him that if he don't give orders to bust up this thievin' combination the cattle owners of this county will come down there an' yank off his hide!"

CHAPTER VIII

A WOMAN'S MERCY

GARY WARDEN did not stand at the office window many minutes after he saw Lawler on the street. He drew on his coat, took his hat from a hook, on the wall and descended the stairs. At the street door he glanced swiftly around, saw Red King standing at the hitching rail in front of the building, and several other horses farther up the street. There were several men on the sidewalks, but he did not see Lawler.

Grinning crookedly, Warden crossed the street and made his way to the station building, where a few minutes later he was talking with Simmons. Simmons was visibly excited. There was curiosity in Warden's gaze.

"He's wise," said Simmons. He was still wiping perspiration from his forehead, and he mechanically repeated to Warden the words he had uttered to himself immediately after Lawler left his office: "I'm glad it's over. I've been dreadin' it. He's the only one in the whole bunch that I was afraid of. There'll be hell to pay in this section, now — pure, unadulterated hell, an' no mistake!" And then he added something that had occurred to him afterward: "If the big guys back of this thing knowed Kane Lawler as well as I know him, they'd have thought a heap before they started this thing!"

"Bah!" sneered Warden; "you're raving! We

know what we are doing. You do as you're told—that's all. And keep your mouth shut. Just keep on telling them there are no cars. That's the truth, isn't it?" He grinned gleefully at Simmons.

"So he's wise, eh?" he added. "Well, I'm damned glad of it—the sagebrush rummie! We'll make him hump before we get through with him!"

Hatred of Lawler had seized Warden—a passion that ran through his veins with the virulence of a strong poison. It had been the incident of the fluttering handkerchief that had aroused him. Until then he had merely disliked Lawler, aware of the latent strength of him, his rugged manliness, and his quiet confidence. All those evidences of character had irritated him, for they had brought an inevitable contrast between himself and the man, and he knew he lacked those things which would have made him Lawler's equal. He felt inferior, and the malevolence that accompanied the conviction was reflected in his face as he faced Simmons.

"No cars, now—damn them! Not a single car! Understand, Simmons? No cars—you can't get them! No matter what happens, you can't get cars—for anybody!"

He left Simmons and descended to the street. As he passed the front of the Willets Hotel he saw Lawler and his friends inside; but Lawler had his back turned, and the others were interestedly watching him, gesturing and talking.

Warden entered the front door of the Wolf. He stopped at the bar for a drink, and the barkeeper told

him, in reply to his question, that Singleton was in a rear room.

Singleton was alone. He was sitting in a chair at a table, with a glass in front of him, and he was staring abstractedly at the floor when Warden entered, closing the door behind him.

Warden drew a chair up to the table and dropped into it. And then for the first time he looked closely at Singleton's face and saw the gash on his left cheek. The wound had been treated, but beneath the cloth at one end Warden could see the open flesh.

"What in blazes has happened to you?" inquired Warden.

"Lawler," growled Singleton; "he walloped my kid down at the schoolhouse, an' when I went down there to take the kid's part, he walloped me, too." He grinned lugubriously. "I didn't know the cuss could hit so hard," he muttered. "Warden, he salivated me—hit me so durned hard I thought the roof had dropped on me."

Warden stiffened; then leaned forward, his lips loose, his eyes malignant. "What do you carry those two guns for, Singleton? I thought you knew how to use them. Men have told me you know."

"Bah!" exclaimed Singleton. His gaze met Warden's, his eyes gleaming with resentment. "What do you know about Kane Lawler?"

"I hate him, Singleton."

"Well, I reckon you ain't the only one. I ain't exactly in love with the cuss, myself. I was thinkin' of my guns when I was with him in the schoolhouse, but

somehow I didn't feel like takin' a chance on slingin' 'em. I ain't tryin' to explain nothin' — I just couldn't make my hands go for 'em, that's all. Hell! I reckon the man who can draw a gun on Kane Lawler when he's lookin' at him ain't been born yet. But I'm gettin' square with him for wallopin' me — I'm lettin' you know that, right enough!"

"You'll have your chance, Singleton. Lawler will have to trail his cattle — as far as Red Rock, anyway."

Singleton's eyes glowed with venomous satisfaction. He grinned evilly at Warden.

"So he wouldn't do business with you, eh? I knowed it, an' I've been gettin' ready. Ha, ha! He'll wish he had. Blondy Antrim rode in as far as Kinney's cañon last night. I met him an' had a long talk with him. He's keen for it — says he admires any guy which can plan a thing that big. Grinned like a hyena when I told him the big guys back of it wouldn't let any law interfere. He's got seventy men, he says — dare-devil gun-fighters from down south a piece which will do anything he tells 'em an' howl for more."

Warden moistened his lips as he grinned his satisfaction.

"There's only one trail, Singleton — you are sure of that?"

"One trail — the Tom Long trail. The devil himself couldn't find another through that country."

Warden leaned back in his chair, laughing lowly. Into his manner as he sat there came a confidence that had not been there before — bold, arrogant. His

laugh had a sinister quality in it; in his eyes was the light of greed.

And as he watched Singleton something else came into his eyes — something abysmal, causing them to narrow and glow with a bestial light.

"Singleton," he said, his voice thick and throaty; "when I stepped into Jim Lefingwell's boots the county board of education appointed me to succeed Lefingwell as school commissioner for Willets. It strikes me that something ought to be done about the teacher punishing your boy. I think I had better have a talk with her."

"Shucks," growled Singleton; "I reckon the kid deserved what he got. He was tryin' to wallop her when Lawler come in. I ain't admirin' Ruth Hamlin none, but I reckon she wasn't to blame for that. If you was figgerin' to see Lawler, now, why that would be more to the point." He grinned crookedly at Warden, slight mockery in his gaze.

Warden scowled. "That's your job, Singleton. If he tries to 'wallop' me as he walloped you, I'll have something to say to him."

"It's safer to telegraph to the cuss," grinned Singleton, sourly.

Warden apparently did not hear Singleton's last words, for he was gazing meditatively past him. He took leave of Singleton and walked to the front of the saloon, where he stood for many minutes leaning on the bar, thoughtfully looking out into the street.

The shadows of the buildings across the street from him had grown long, and the light from the sun was

mellowing when Warden walked to the front door and stood for an instant on the threshold.

Down the street in front of his office stood Red King. Other horses were hitched here and there, but there was no human being in sight. The quiet peace of the waning afternoon had settled over town; it was the period when human activity slackens.

Warden stepped down upon the sidewalk. There was a furtive gleam in his eyes, his face was flushed; he was in the grip of a passion that thoughts of Ruth Hamlin had brought to him. He had seen the girl a number of times; he had talked with her twice. Each time when he had talked with her he had felt the heat of a great desire seize him. And during his talk with Singleton he had yielded to the impulse that was now driving him.

Just why the impulse had come to him at that instant he could not have told. He knew Kane Lawler's name had been mentioned in connection with the girl's; and it might have been that his hatred of Lawler, and the sudden jealousy that had developed in him over the incident of the fluttering handkerchief, had gripped him. But he was aware that just at this time he was risking much — risking his life and jeopardizing the business venture in which he was engaged. Yet the impulse which was driving him had made him reckless; it had dulled his sense of responsibility; had swept away all considerations of caution. When he saw there was no one on the street he walked eastward to the livery stable where he kept his horse, saddled and bridled it, mounted and rode away.

His ranch, the Two Diamond, was fifteen miles southwestward. Warden rode directly east, bearing a little south after he had traveled some distance from town, striking a narrow trail that wound a sinuous course over the plains.

The passion that had seized Warden still held him. He told himself that he really intended merely to call upon Ruth professionally, in his rôle of school commissioner; he assured himself that she must be made to understand that the forcible disciplining of her pupils would not be tolerated. Yet as he rode he kept glancing backward apprehensively, though he knew that if he made his visit merely official he need have nothing to fear from anyone.

Twice, as Warden rode, he halted his horse and debated the wisdom of returning. And twice he rode on again telling himself he had a right to visit the girl, and that he meant no harm.

At most he desired merely to see the girl again, to experience the thrills that he had felt upon the other occasions he had talked with her. And when at dusk he came in sight of the Hamlin cabin he felt that he had really come on an official visit.

He saw Ruth's pony saddled and bridled, standing at a corner of the corral, where she had left him when she had returned from the schoolhouse some hours before.

She had found the house unoccupied when she arrived; there was evidence that her father had left shortly after breakfast — for the dishes were unwashed and the floor unswept — two duties that he always had

performed, knowing that in the morning she had a ten-mile ride before her.

Table and floor had been attended to by the girl. But she had done little else. For hours she had sat in a chair near the front door, thinking of what had happened in the schoolhouse — of what she had heard — the evidence that Kane Lawler knew what her father had been doing, and that he was trying to protect her.

She believed it was the latter knowledge that made her feel so small, so insignificant, so utterly miserable. For while she was convinced that he would think no less of her, no matter what her father had done, the fact that Lawler was trying to keep the knowledge of her father's guilt from her told her that he appreciated the keen disgrace that threatened her.

When Warden dismounted near the cabin door she thought it was her father returning, and she got up and went to the stove, where she stood, lifting the iron lids, preparatory to starting a fire.

She felt that she could not look at her father, after what had happened; and so she laid some wood in the stove, deliberately keeping her back to the door, trying to think of something to say to her father — for she had determined to tell him about the incident of the morning.

She was forced to go to a shelf for matches, however, and when she turned, her eyes flashing with accusation, she saw Warden standing in the open doorway, watching her. She stood very still, and spoke no word.

When Warden noted the swift change of expression

that came over her face—the astonishment that instantly dominated all else, he grinned smoothly.

"Surprised to see me, Miss Hamlin? You shouldn't be, after what happened at the schoolhouse today. I have called to have a talk with you about it."

The girl's quick smile was cold and indifferent. What happened to her now was of little importance. She supposed Warden had come to tell her she had been discharged; but that made little difference to her. She felt that she had done right in attempting to chastize Jimmy Singleton; and she would do it again under the same circumstances.

"Is it necessary to talk?" she questioned, coldly. "I am not sorry for what I did. I suppose you have come to notify me of my dismissal."

"On the contrary, I have come to assure you that you did what was right—exactly what I would have done," smiled Warden. "The only criticism I have is that you should not have dismissed school; you should have stayed right there and had it out."

Warden stepped inside and walked close to Ruth.

"I want to shake hands with you, Miss Hamlin; you have the necessary spirit."

Some color surged into Ruth's face. She realized now, that she did not want to lose the position—that it meant much to her. It meant at least her independence from her father, that she could support herself without depending upon the money he gained from his guilty practices. It meant, too, that the additional disgrace of being summarily dismissed would not descend upon her.

Impulsively, she took Warden's hand. She looked inquiringly at him though, when he gripped it tightly, and the color that had come into her face fled, leaving it pale, when Warden continued to hold the hand, gripping it so hard that she could not withdraw it. She looked intently at him, over the few feet of space that was between them, noting the queer light in his eyes — a glow of passion; watching the crimson tide that rose above his collar, staining his face darkly.

For the driving desire that had seized Warden had conquered him. Physical contact with the girl had brought his passions to life again. They had overwhelmed him, had sent his grain skittering back into those dead and gone periods when man's desires surmounted laws.

Warden no longer considered the risks whose ghosts had haunted him on his ride to the Hamlin cabin; his fears had been swallowed by the oblivion of mental irresponsibility. He had only the vivid knowledge that he was alone in the cabin with the girl.

"But there are people in Willets who are determined that you shall go," he said. "I can keep you on the job in spite of them, my dear — and I'll do it. But there are certain conditions — certain ——"

She struck him, then, bringing her free hand around with a wide, full sweep. The open hand landed on the side of his face with a smack that resounded through the cabin, staggering him, causing him to release the other hand.

A great, red welt appeared on his cheek where the hand had struck; and he felt of his cheek with his

fingers, amazed, incredulous. For an instant only, however, he stood, trying to wipe the sting of the blow away. Then he laughed throatily and started after her — she having retreated behind the table, where she stood, watching him, her eyes wide, her face dead white.

Warden, leaning far over the table, saw her eyes close as she stood there; saw her fingers grip the edge of the table; noted that her chin had dropped and that she seemed to be on the point of fainting.

Warden's back was toward the front door; he had to slip sideways to get around the table, and as he did so his profile was brought toward the door. He saw a shadow at his feet — a shadow cast by the last effulgent glow of the setting sun — a shadow made by a man standing in the doorway.

Warden halted and held hard to the table edge. Reason, cold, remorseless reason surged back into his brain, accompanied by a paralyzing fear. Some prescience told him that the man in the doorway was Kane Lawler. And though he was convinced of it, he was a long time lifting his head and in turning it the merest trifle toward the door. And when he saw that the dread apparition was indeed Lawler, and that Lawler's heavy pistol was extending from his side, the hand and arm behind it rigid, he stiffened, flung himself around and faced Lawler, his mouth open, his eyes bulging with the terrible dread of death and the awful certainty that death was imminent.

For an instant there was a silence — breathless, strained, pregnant with the promise of tragedy. Then

the silence was rent by Lawler's voice, dry, light, and vibrant:

"Warden, if you move a quarter of an inch I'll blow you to hell!"

Lawler walked slowly to Ruth, took her by the shoulders and steadied her.

"It's Lawler, Ruth," he said reassuringly. "I want you to tell me what's wrong here." He shook her, gently, and she opened her eyes and looked at him dazedly. Then, as she seemed to recognize him, to become convinced that it was really Lawler whom she had seen in the doorway, she smiled and rested her head on his shoulder, her hands patting his arms and his back as though to convince herself beyond doubt.

For an instant she stood there, holding tightly to him; and then she released herself, stepping back with flushed cheeks and shamed eyes.

"Kane, I am so glad you came!" she said. "Why, Kane! that man—" She shuddered and covered her face with her hands.

"I reckon that's all!" said Lawler. There was a cold, bitter grin on his lips as he stepped around the table and stood in front of Warden.

"Warden, I'm going back to town with you. We're going right now. Go out and get on your horse!"

Lawler's voice, the cold flame in his eyes and his icy deliberation, told Ruth of a thing that, plainly, Warden had already seen—that though both men would begin the ride to "town," only Lawler would reach there.

Ruth watched, fascinated, her senses dulled by what

she saw in Lawler's manner and in the ghastly white of Warden's face. Warden understood. He understood, and his breath was labored, his flesh palsied—and still he was going to obey. For Ruth saw him move; saw him sway toward the door; saw Lawler watching him as though he was fighting to hold his passions in check, fighting back a lust to kill the man where he stood.

Warden had reached the door; he was crossing the threshold—his head bowed, his shoulders sagging, his legs bending at the knees—when Ruth moved. She ran around the table and got between Lawler and Warden, stretching her arms in the open doorway, barring Lawler's way. Her eyes were wild with terror.

"Don't, Kane!" she begged; "don't do that! Oh, I know what you mean to do. Please, Kane; let him go—alone. He didn't do—what—what—" She paused, shuddering.

Lawler's eyes softened as he looked at her; he smiled faintly, and she knew she had won. She did not resist when he drew her gently away from the door. Standing just inside, she saw him go out to where Warden stood, pale and shaking, looking at both of them. Then she heard Lawler's voice as he spoke to Warden:

"Warden, I'm letting you off. Miss Ruth is going to teach school where she's been teaching it. The schoolhouse is your deadline—the same as this cabin. Whenever you step into one or the other, your friends are going to mourn for you. Get going!"

It was a long time before Lawler moved. And when he did re-enter the cabin Ruth was nowhere to be seen.

Lawler paused near the center of the big room and gazed about him. The door leading to one of the rooms that ran from the big room was open. The other was closed. He walked to the closed door and stood before it, his lips set in grim lines, his eyes somber.

"Ruth!" he called, lowly.

There was no answer; and again he called. This time a smothered voice reached him, quavering, tearful:

"Please go away, Kane; I don't want to see you. I'm so upset."

"I reckon I'll go, Ruth," But still he lingered, watching the door, now smiling faintly, understandingly. Beyond the door were the sounds of sobbing.

Lawler folded his arms over his chest and with the fingers of one hand caressing his chin, watched the door.

"Ruth," he said, finally; "where is your father?"

"I—I d-don't know. And I don't c-care."

Lawler started, and his eyes narrowed with suspicion as he looked at the door—it seemed that he was trying to peer through it.

"Ruth," he said slowly; "I saw you looking into the schoolhouse through the broken window, after I hit Singleton the second time, and while I was talking to him. What did you hear?"

"Everything, Kane—everything." The sobs were furious, now.

Lawler frowned through a silence during which his eyes glowed savagely. Then, after a while, he spoke again.

"I've known it for a long time, Ruth."

"Oh!" she sobbed.

"It was Singleton's fault. He won't do it any more."

There was no answer; a brooding silence came from beyond the door.

Then Lawler said gently: "Ruth, I'm asking you again: Will you marry me?"

"I'll never marry you, now, Kane—never, never, never!"

The sobs had ceased now; but the voice was choked with emotion.

"All right, Ruth," said Lawler; "I'll ask you again, sometime. And the next time you won't refuse."

He crossed the floor and stepped outside. Leaping into the saddle he sent Red King thundering away from the cabin into the dusk that swathed the southern distance.

A yellow moon was rising above the peaks of the hills at the far edge of the Wolf River valley when Lawler dismounted from Red King and strode to the big Circle L bunkhouse. Inside a kerosene lamp burned on a table around which were several men.

The men looked up in astonishment as Lawler entered; then got to their feet, looking at Lawler wonderingly, for on his face was an expression that none of them ever had seen there before.

"Have any of you seen Joe Hamlin?" said Lawler.

A yellow-haired giant among them grinned widely and pointed eloquently toward a bunk, where a man's body, swathed in blankets, could be seen.

"That's him," said the yellow-haired giant. "He hit here this mornin', sayin' you'd hired him, an' that he was standin' straight up on his legs like a man, hereafter. We took him on under them conditions."

Lawler strode to the bunk. He deliberately unrolled the blankets, seized Hamlin by the middle and lifted him, setting him down on the floor ungently.

By the time Lawler released him, Hamlin had his eyes open, and he blinked in bewilderment at the faces of the men, opening his mouth with a snap when he saw Lawler.

"Lawler, what in blazes is the matter — I ain't done nothin'!"

"You're going to do something!" declared Lawler. He waited until Hamlin dressed, then he led him outside. At an end of the corral fence, where no one could hear, Lawler talked long and earnestly to Hamlin. And when Hamlin left, riding a Circle L horse, he was grinning.

"It's a straight trail, Hamlin," said Lawler gravely, as Hamlin rode away; "a straight trail, and not a word to Ruth!"

"Straight it is, Lawler," answered Hamlin. "I'm testifyin' to that!"

CHAPTER IX

THE ARM OF POWER

LAWLER stayed long enough at the Circle L to speak a word with his mother. His sister Mary had gone to bed when he stepped into the front door of the ranchhouse, to be greated by Mrs. Lawler, who had heard him cross the porch, recognized his step and had come to meet him.

He smiled at her, but there was a stiffness about his lips, and a cold, whimsical light in his eyes, that told her much.

She drew a deep breath, and smiled faintly.

"You have disagreed with Gary Warden," she said. "He will not keep Lefingwell's agreement."

"Said he never heard of any agreement," said Lawler. "I rode in to tell the boys to hold the herd here until I got back from the capital. I'm going to see the railroad commissioner — about cars. Simmons says there isn't a car in the state. If we can't get cars, we'll drive to Red Rock." He took her face in his hands and patted her cheeks gently. "Blackburn will probably bed the trail herd down on the Rabbit Ear. I'm joining him there, and then I'm going to the capital in the morning."

Mrs. Lawler was standing on the porch when he mounted Red King; she was still standing there when Lawler looked back after he had ridden half a mile.

Lawler found Blackburn and the herd on the Rabbit Ear, as he had anticipated. The Rabbit Ear was an insignificant creek that intersected the Wolf at a distance of about fifteen miles from the Circle L; and the outfit had selected for a camp a section of plain that ran to the water's edge. It was a spot that had been used before by the men of the outfit, and when Lawler rode up the men were stretched out in their blankets around a small fire.

Blackburn grinned wickedly when informed of Gary Warden's refusal to keep Lefingwell's agreement.

"Didn't I hit him right," he sneered. "I aim to be able to tell a coyote first pop, whether he's sneakin' in the sagebrush or settin' in a office. They ain't no difference. No cars, eh? Bah! If you say the word, me an' the boys'll hit the breeze to town an' run Warden and Simmons out!

"You're wastin' your time, goin' to see Morgan Hatfield, the commissioner. Don't I know him? He tin-horned over at Laskar for two or three years before he got into politics; an' now he's tin-hornin' the cattle owners of the state. He'll grin that chessie-cat grin of his an' tell you he can't do nothin'. An' he'll do it! Bah! This country is goin' plumb to hell. Any country will, when there's too much law hangin' around loose!"

He scowled and looked hard at Lawler. "We'll hold 'em at Willets, all right an' regular, until you give us the word to hit the Tom Long trail. But while you're gone I'm gettin' ready to travel—for there won't be any cars, Lawler, an' don't you forget it!"

Lawler said nothing in reply to Blackburn's vitriolic speech. So unperturbed did he seem that Blackburn remarked to one of the men — after Lawler wrapped himself in a blanket and stretched out near the fire — that, "The more Lawler's got on his mind the less he talks."

Long before dawn Lawler saddled up and departed. When Blackburn awoke and rubbed his eyes, he cast an eloquent glance at the spot where Lawler had lain, grinned crookedly and remarked to the world at large: "Anyway, we're backin' his play to the limit — an' don't you forget it!"

Lawler left Red King at the stable from which, the day before, Gary Warden had ridden on his way to the Hamlin cabin; and when the west-bound train steamed in he got aboard, waving a hand to the friends who, the day before in the Willets Hotel had selected him as their spokesman.

It was afternoon when Lawler stepped from the train in the capital. He strode across the paved floor of the train shed, through a wide iron gate and into a barber-shop that adjoined the waiting-room.

There he gave himself to the care of a barber who addressed him as Mr. Lawler in a voice of respect.

"I've shaved you before, Mr. Lawler," said the man. "I think it was when you was down here last year, to the convention. I heard the speech you made that time, nominating York Falkner for governor. Too bad you didn't run yourself. You'd have made it, saving the state from the tree-toad which is hanging to it now."

During his short stay at the Circle L the night before, Lawler had changed from his cowboy rigging to a black suit of civilian cut, with tight trousers that were stuffed into the tops of soft boots of dull leather. The coat was long, after the fashion of the period, cut square at the bottom, and the silk lapels matched the flowing tie that was carelessly bowed at the collar of a shirt of some soft, white material. He wore a black, felt hat; and out of consideration for the custom and laws of the capital, he had shoved his six-shooter around so that it was out of sight on his right hip. However, the cartridge-studded belt was around his waist; he kept the black coat buttoned over it, hiding it.

He had been in the capital often, and had no difficulty in finding his way to the capitol building. It was at the intersection of two wide streets—a broad, spacious structure of white stone, standing in the center of a well-kept grass plot. It was imposing, hinting of the greatness of the state that had erected it, suggesting broadness of vision and simple majesty.

The state was not at fault, Lawler reflected as he mounted the broad stone stairs that led upward to the interior of the building; the state was founded upon principles that were fundamentally just; and the wisdom of the people, their resources, their lives, were back of it all. This building was an expression of the desire of the people; it represented them; it was the citadel of government from which came the laws to which they bowed; it was the visible arm of power.

Lawler crossed the big rotunda, where the light was subdued; and walked down a wide corridor, pausing

before a door on which was the legend: "State Railroad Commissioner." A few minutes later, after having given his name to an attendant, he was standing in a big, well-lighted and luxuriously furnished room—hat in hand, looking at a tall, slender man who was seated in a swivel chair at a big, flat-top desk.

The man was older than Lawler, much older. The hair at his temples was almost white, but heavy and coarse. An iron-gray wisp straggled over his brow, where he had run a hand through it, apparently; his eyes were gray, keen, with a light in them that hinted of a cold composure equal to that which gleamed in Lawler's. The long, hooked nose, though, gave the eyes an appearance of craftiness, and the slightly downward droop at the corners of his mouth suggested cynicism.

He smiled, veiling an ironic flash in his eyes by drooping the lids, as he spoke to his visitor.

"Hello, Lawler," he said, smiling faintly, "take a chair." He waved a hand toward one, on the side of the desk opposite him. "It's been a long time since you struck town, hasn't it—since the last state convention—eh?"

There was a hint of laughter in his voice, a suggestion of mockery in the unspoken inference that he remembered the defeat of Lawler's candidate.

Lawler smiled. "Well, you did beat us, that's a fact, Hatfield. There's no use denying that. But we took our medicine, Hatfield."

"You had to," grinned the other. "Whenever the people of a state ——"

"Hatfield," interrupted Lawler, gravely, "it seems to me that the people of this state are always taking medicine — political medicine. That's what I have come to talk with you about."

Hatfield's smile faded. His eyes gleamed coldly. "What's wrong, Lawler?"

"It's cars, Hatfield — or rather no cars," he added, grimly. "Usually, at this season of the year, there will be a hundred or two empty cars on the siding at Willets — with other hundreds on the way. This year the siding is empty, and Jay Simmons says there are no cars to be had. He tells me there isn't an empty car in the state. Caldwell, of the Star, and Barthman, Littlefield, Corts, Sigmund, and Lester — who are ranch owners near Willets — told me to come down here and ask you what can be done. I'm asking you."

Hatfield eyed Lawler steadily as the latter talked; his gaze did not waver as Lawler concluded. But a slight stain appeared in his cheeks, which instantly receded, leaving them normal again. But that slight flush betrayed Hatfield to Lawler; it told Lawler that Hatfield knew why there were no cars. And Lawler's eyes chilled as his gaze met Hatfield's.

"I've talked that matter over with the railroad people several times," said Hatfield, in an impersonal, snapping voice. "They tell me that you cattle owners are to blame. You seem to think that it is the business of the railroad company to guess how many cars you will want. You wait until the round-up is over before you begin to think about cars, and then you want them all in a bunch."

"You are mistaken, Hatfield. Along about the middle of the season every prudent cattle owner arranges with a buyer or with the railroad company for the necessary cars. In my case, I made arrangements with Jim Lefingwell, the buyer at Willets, as long ago as last spring. But Lefingwell isn't buyer any more, and Gary Warden, the present buyer, refuses to recognize my agreement with Lefingwell."

"A written agreement?"

"Unfortunately not. Lefingwell's word was always good."

Hatfield's smile was very near a sneer. "If you neglect the rudiments of business it seems to me that you have only yourselves to blame. In your case, Lawler, it is rather astonishing. You have quite a reputation for intelligence; you own one of the biggest ranches in the state; you are wealthy; and last year you tried to tell the people of the state how to run it. You even went so far as to make a speech in the convention, naming the man you preferred for governor."

Lawler smiled, though his gaze was level.

"Don't be unpleasant, Hatfield. You understand I am not here as a politician, but as a mere citizen petitioning you to act in this railroad case. What I have done or said has no bearing on the matter at all. The railroad company will not provide cars in which to ship our stock East, and I am here to ask you to do something about it."

Hatfield appeared to meditate.

"Warden offered to buy your cattle, you say?"

Lawler nodded. But he had not mentioned to Hat-

field that Warden had offered to buy the cattle—Hatfield had either surmised that, or had received information through other sources. Lawler suspected that the railroad commissioner had been informed through the various mediums at his command, and this was evidence of collusion.

"And Simmons says there are no cars," mused Hatfield. "Well, that seems to leave you shippers in a bad predicament, doesn't it? Can't you drive to some other point—where you can arrange to get cars?"

"Five hundred miles, to Red Rock, over the Tom Long trail—the worst trail in the country."

"What price could you get at Red Rock?"

"The market price—about thirty dollars."

"And what did Warden offer?"

"Twenty-five."

"H'm. It seems to me, considering the inconvenience of driving over the Tom Long trail, you'd be better off taking Warden's offer. It's remarkable to what lengths you cattle owners will go for a few dollars."

"Five dollars a head on a herd of eight thousand amounts to forty thousand dollars, Hatfield," Lawler reminded him.

"Hatfield, this isn't a question of dollars, it's a question of principle. This situation is a result of a scheme to hold up the cattle owners of the state. It's mighty plain. The railroad company refuses cars to the cattle owners, but will supply them to buyers like Warden. The buyers must have some assurance of getting cars, or they wouldn't buy a single hoof. What

we want is to force the railroad to supply cattle owners with cars."

"Why not hold your stock over the winter?" suggested Hatfield, with a faint, half-smile.

"Hatfield, you know that can't be done. There isn't a cattle owner in the country who is prepared to winter his stock. Had we known this situation was to develop we might have laid in some feed — though that is an expensive method. Nothing has been done, for we expected to ship by rail as usual. Almost every owner has a stock of feed on hand, but that is for breeders, and for other stock that doesn't grade up. If we are forced to winter our stock on the ranges half of them would die of starvation and exposure before spring."

Hatfield narrowed his eyes and studied Lawler's face. He half pursed his lips for a smile, but something in the grave, level eyes that looked into his dissuaded him, and he frowned and cleared his throat.

"It looks mighty bad, for a fact," he said. "The buyers seem to have you owners in something of a pocket. The worst of it is, that the thing is general. I have complaints from all over the state. The railroad people say there is nothing they can do. I've taken it up with them. The explanation they offer is that during the summer they sent most of their rolling stock East, to take care of an unprecedented demand there. For some reason or other — which they don't attempt to explain — the cars haven't been coming back as they should. It looks to me, Lawler, like you owners are in for a bad winter."

"What about the law, Hatfield; can't we force them to supply cars?"

Hatfield's smile came out—it was sarcastic.

"The wise law-makers of the state, who gave the railroad company a franchise, neglected to provide a punitive clause. There isn't a tooth in the law—I've looked it over from one end to the other, and so has the attorney-general. This office is helpless, Lawler. I would advise you to accept the offer of your resident buyer. It may be that those fellows have an agreement with the railroad company, but we haven't any evidence, and without evidence we couldn't do anything, even if there were teeth in the law."

Lawler smiled and went out. As the door closed behind him Hatfield sank back into his chair and chuckled gleefully.

"Swallowed it!" he said in an undertone; "swallowed it whole. And that's the guy I was most afraid of!"

Lawler walked down the big corridor, across the rotunda, and into another corridor to the door of the governor's office. As he passed through the rotunda he was aware that several persons congregated there watched him curiously; and he heard one of them say, guardedly:

"That's Kane Lawler, of Wolf River. He'd have been governor, right now, if he'd said the word last fall. Biggest man in the state!"

There was truth in the man's words, though Lawler reddened when he heard them. Three times in the days preceding the convention which had nominated

Perry Haughton, the present governor, delegations from various sections of the state had visited Lawler at the Circle L, endeavoring to prevail upon him to accept the nomination; and one day the editor of the most important newspaper in the capital had journeyed to the Circle L, to add his voice to the argument advanced by the delegations.

But Lawler had refused, because previously to their visits he had given his word to York Falkner. And he had championed Falkner's candidacy with such energy and enthusiasm that in the end — on the day of the convention — his name was better known than that of his candidate. And at the last minute the convention was in danger of stampeding to him, threatening to nominate him despite his protests. He had been forced to tell them plainly that he would not serve, if nominated and elected, because he had pledged his support to Falkner. And Falkner, at home in a distant county while the convention was in session, remained silent, refusing to answer the frantic requests that he withdraw in favor of Lawler. That attitude had defeated Falkner, as his loyalty to his friend had increased his popularity.

Now, pausing before the door of the governor's office, Lawler was aware of the completeness of the sacrifice he had made for Falkner. His face paled, his eyes glowed, and a thrill ran over him. At this moment — if he had not made the sacrifice — he might have been sitting in the governor's office, listening to Caldwell, or Sigmund, or others from his own section, — perhaps from other sections of the state — advising

them, seeking to help them. For one thing, Morgan Hatfield would not have been his railroad commissioner!

As it was, he was going to enter the governor's office as a mere petitioner, not sure of his reception — for Perry Haughton had beaten Falkner, and owed Lawler nothing. Indeed, after his election, Haughton had referred sarcastically to Lawler.

When Lawler found himself in the presence of the governor he was in a grimly humorous mood. For despite the sarcastic flings he had directed at Lawler, the governor ponderously arose from a big chair at his desk and advanced to meet him, a hand outstretched.

"Hello, Lawler!" he said; "glad to see you. Where have you been keeping yourself?"

Lawler shook the governor's hand, not replying to the effusive greeting. Lawler smiled, though, and perhaps the governor saw in the smile an answer to his question. He led Lawler to a chair, and returned to his own, where he sat, leaning back, watching his visitor with a speculative gaze.

Perry Haughton was a big, florid man with sleek, smooth manners, a bland smile and an engaging eye, which held a deep gleam of insincerity. The governor posed as a genial, generous, broad-minded public official — and it had been upon that reputation that he had been nominated and elected — but the geniality had been adopted for political reasons. The real man was an arrogant autocrat, lusting for power and wealth.

He disliked Lawler — feared him. Also, since the convention he had felt vindictive toward Lawler, for

Lawler had offended him by his tenacious championship of Falkner. He had almost lost the nomination through Lawler's efforts.

"Been in town long?" he queried.

"Just long enough to have a talk with Hatfield."

The governor smiled wanly. "Hatfield has been having his troubles, Lawler. An unprecedented situation has developed in the state. The railroad company seems to be unable to supply cars for cattle shipments. We have investigated, and so far we have been unable to discover whether the shortage is intentional or accidental. Whatever the cause, it is a bad situation—very bad. We've got to take some action!"

"Whatever action you take ought to be immediate, Governor," said Lawler. "The round-up is over and cattle must move. That is why I am here—to ask you what can be done."

"I have taken the matter up with the attorney-general, Lawler. The law is vague and indefinite. We can't proceed under it. However, we are going to pass new laws at the next session of the legislature."

"That will be in January," said Lawler. "Half the cattle in the state will starve before that time."

The governor flushed. "That's the best we can do, Lawler."

"Why not call a special session, Governor?"

Haughton laughed. "Do you keep yourself informed, Lawler?" he said, a suspicion of mockery in his voice. "If you do, you will remember that the legislature has just adjourned, after acting upon some important matters."

"This matter is important enough to demand another session immediately!" declared Lawler.

The governor cleared his throat and gazed steadily at Lawler, his eyes gleaming with a vindictive light that he tried to make judicial.

"As a matter of fact, Lawler, this question of shipping cattle is not as important as you might think — to the state at large, that is. If you take all the packing out of the case you will find at the bottom that it is merely a disagreement between cattle owners and cattle buyers. It seems to me that it is not a matter for state interference. As I understand, the cattle buyers have offered a certain price. The owners ask another; and the owners want the state to force the buyers to pay their price. I can't see that the state has any business to meddle with the affair at all. The state can't become a clearing-house for the cattle industry!"

"We are not asking the state to act in that capacity, Haughton. We want the state to force the railroad company to provide cars."

"It can't be done, Lawler! There is no provision in the law under which we can force the railroad company to provide cars."

Lawler laughed mirthlessly and got to his feet, crossing his arms over his chest and looking down at the governor. For a time there was silence in the big room, during which the governor changed color several times, and drooped his eyes under Lawler's grimly humorous gaze. Then Lawler spoke:

"All right, Haughton," he said; "I'll carry your message back to my friends at Willets. I'll also carry

it to Lafe Renwick, of the *News,* here in the capital. We'll make it all plain enough, so that your position won't be misunderstood. The railroad company is not even a resident corporation, and yet you, as governor, refuse to act in the interests of the state cattle owners, against it — merely to force it to play fair. This will all make interesting conversation — and more interesting reading. My visit here has proved very interesting, and instructive. Good-day, sir."

He strode out, leaving Haughton to glare after him. Ten minutes later he was in the editorial office of the *News,* detailing his conversation with Hatfield and the governor to a keen-eyed man of thirty-five, named Metcalf, who watched him intently as he spoke. At the conclusion of the visit the keen-eyed man grinned.

"You've started something, Lawler," he said. "We've heard something of this, but we've been waiting to see just how general it was. You'll understand, now, why I was so eager to have you run last fall. You'll not escape so easily next time!"

Late that night Lawler got off the train at Willets; and a few minutes later he was talking with Caldwell and the others in the Willets Hotel.

"It's a frame-up, men," he told them. "Hatfield and the governor both subscribe to the same sentiments, which are to the effect that this is a free country — meaning that if you don't care to accept what the buyers offer you can drive your cattle out of the state or let them starve to death on the open range."

The big hanging-lamp swinging from the ceiling of the lounging-room flickered a dull light into the faces

of the men, revealing lines that had not been in them some hours before. Somehow, it had seemed to them, Lawler would straighten things out for them; they had faith in Lawler; they had trusted in his energy and in his mental keenness. And when they had sent him to the capital they had thought that the governor would not dare to refuse his request. He was too great a man to be trifled with.

It was plain to them, now, that the invisible power which they had challenged was a gigantic thing — for it had not been impressed by their champion.

Their faces betrayed their disappointment; in their downcast eyes and in their furtive glances at one another — and at Lawler — one might have read evidence of doubt and uncertainty. They might fight the powerful forces opposed to them — and there was no doubt that futile rage against the power surged in the veins of every man in the group about Lawler. But there seemed to be no way to fight; there seemed to be nothing tangible upon which to build a hope, and no way to attack the secret, subtle force which had so arrogantly thwarted them.

There was an uneasy light in Caldwell's eyes when he finally looked up at Lawler. He frowned, reddened, and spoke haltingly, as though ashamed:

"Lawler, I reckon they've got us foul. It's late — today's the twenty-eighth of October. Not anticipatin' this deal, we delayed the round-up too long. It's a month's drive to Red Rock, over the worst trail in the country. We all know that. If we'd happen to run into a storm on the Tom Long trail we wouldn't get

no cattle to Red Rock at all. An' if we winter them on the open range there wouldn't be a sound hoof left by spring, for we've got no feed put by. It's too certain, men; an' a bad year would bust me wide open. I reckon I'll sell my stock to Gary Warden. I hate it like poison, but I reckon it's the only thing we can do."

The others nodded, plainly having determined to follow Caldwell's example. But they kept their eyes lowered, not looking at Lawler, for they felt that this surrender was not relished by him. Caldwell almost jumped with astonishment when he felt Lawler's hands on his shoulders; and he looked hard at the other, wondering, vastly relieved when Lawler laughed.

"I reckon I don't blame you," said Lawler. "It's a mighty blue outlook. Winter is close, and they've got things pretty well blocked. They figured on the late round-up, I reckon. Sell to Warden and wind the thing up — that's the easiest way."

Caldwell grasped Lawler's hand and shook it vigorously.

"I thought you'd show right disappointed over us givin' in, after what you tried to do, Lawler. You're sure a square man." He laughed. "You'll be the first to sell to Warden, though," he added, with a faint attempt at humor; "for I seen Blackburn an' some more of your outfit trailin' about a thousand head in tonight. They've got them bedded down about a mile from town. I reckon you'll be runnin' them into the company corral in the mornin'."

"Not a hoof goes into the company corrai, Caldwell," smiled Lawler.

"No?" Caldwell's amazement bulged his eyes. "What then? What you aimin' to do with them?"

"They're going to Red Rock, Caldwell," declared Lawler, quietly. "The thousand Blackburn drove over, and the seven thousand the other boys are holding at the Circle L. I wouldn't sell them to Warden if he offered fifty dollars a head."

It was late when Caldwell and the others rode out of town, heading into the darkness toward their ranches to prepare their herds for the drive to the company corral at Willets. But before they left, Caldwell visited Warden's office, in which, all evening, a light had glowed. Warden's expression indicated he had expected the cattlemen to surrender.

With shamed face Caldwell carried to Warden the news of the surrender; speaking gruffly to Simmons, whom he found in the office with Warden.

"I reckon there'll be cars — now?" he said.

Simmons smiled smoothly. "Them that contracted for cars last spring will probably get them," he said. "I reckon the cause of all this mix-up was that the company wasn't aimin' to play no hit-an'-miss game."

"There'll be a day comin' when the cattlemen in this country will jump on you guys with both feet!" threatened Caldwell. "It's a mighty rotten deal, an' you know it!"

"Is Lawler accepting my price, Caldwell?" interrupted Warden, quietly; "I saw a Circle L trail herd headed toward town this evening."

"Hell!" declared Caldwell; "Lawler ain't so weak-kneed as the rest of us critters. He just got through

tellin' me that he wouldn't sell a hoof to you at fifty! He's drivin' to Red Rock — eight thousand head!"

When Caldwell went out, breathing fast, Warden smiled broadly at Simmons.

"Wire for cars tonight, Simmons," he said. "But don't get them to coming too fast. We'll make them hold their cattle here, we'll keep them guessing as to whether you were telling them the truth about cars. Cars and fools are plentiful, eh, Simmons?"

He got up, donned coat and hat and put out the light. At the foot of the stairs he parted from Simmons, walked down the street to the Wolf and entered.

He found Singleton in the barroom and drew him into a corner.

"He's driving his cattle to Red Rock, Singleton. And he's the only one. The others are selling to me. We've got him now, damn him! we've got him!" he said, his eyes glowing with malignant triumph.

CHAPTER X

THE SECOND OBSTACLE

LAWLER went outside with Caldwell and the others — after Caldwell returned from his visit to Gary Warden — and, standing in the flickering glare of light from inside the hotel, he watched the men ride away.

There was a smile on his lips as he saw them fade into the yawning gulf of moonlit distance, — going in different directions toward their ranches — an ironic smile, softened by understanding and friendship.

For he bore the men no ill will because their decision had not agreed with his. He had not expected them to do as he was determined to do. And he had not asked them.

Had it not been for the agreement he had made with Jim Lefingwell the previous spring, Lawler might also have accepted Gary Warden's price rather than face the hazards of the long drive to Red Rock.

Warden's attitude, however, his arrogance, and the hostile dislike in his eyes, had aroused in Lawler a cold contempt for the man. Added to that was disgust over the knowledge that Warden, and not Jim Lefingwell, was a liar — that Warden had no respect for the sacredness of his word, given to Lefingwell. The man's honor must be wrapped in a bond or a written contract.

The incident in the Hamlin cabin had contributed hatred to the other passions that contact with Warden had aroused in Lawler; but it had been his visit to Simmons and his talks with Hatfield and the governor that had aroused in him the fighting lust that gripped him now.

The ironic smile had faded when he reached the stable where he had left Red King. It had set in serious lines and his chin had taken on a pronounced thrust when he mounted the big horse and sent him southeastward into the glowing moonlight.

He brought Red King to a halt at a spot on the plains where the herd of Circle L cattle were being held for the night, with some cowboys riding monotonous circles around them.

Blackburn had seen him coming, and recognizing him, met him near the camp fire.

The range boss listened, his lips grimming, then silently nodded.

It was past midnight when Lawler reached the Circle L. He let himself into the house noiselessly, changed his clothes, donning the corduroy, the woolen shirt, and the spurred boots that he had worn before beginning his trip to the capital. Then, penning a note to his mother, informing her that he was going to Red Rock with his men, he went out and rode down into the valley, where the other men of the outfit were guarding the main herd, which had been held in the valley at his orders.

Long before dawn the big herd was on the move, heading northward, toward Willets, the twenty men

of the outfit flanking them, heading them up the great slope that led out of the valley.

The progress of the herd was slow, for there was good grazing and the cattle moved reluctantly, requiring the continued efforts of the men to keep them moving at all. And yet when darkness came that night they had reached the Rabbit Ear — where two nights before Blackburn had held the first herd.

It was late in the afternoon of the second day when Lawler and his men came within sight of Willets. They drove the second herd to where Blackburn and his men were holding the first. Leaving Blackburn to make arrangements for camp, Lawler rode on into Willets. From a distance he saw that the company corral was well filled with cattle; and when he saw Lem Caldwell talking with some other men in front of the hotel, he knew the cattle in the corral bore Caldwell's brand.

He waved a hand to Caldwell and the others as he rode past the hotel; but he kept on until he reached the station, where he dismounted, hitched Red King to a rail and crossed the railroad track.

A frame building, small, with a flat shedlike roof, stood near the corral fence — between the tracks and the big gates — and Lawler entered the open door, to find a portly, bald-headed man sitting at a rough, flat-top desk. The man was busy with a pencil and a pad of papers when Lawler entered, and he continued to labor with them, not seeming to notice his visitor.

Lawler halted just inside the door, to await the man's leisure. And then he saw Gary Warden loung-

ing in a chair in a far corner. Warden did not appear to see Lawler, either: he was facing the back of the chair, straddling it, his elbows crossed on the back, his chin resting on his arms, his gaze on the rough board floor.

Lawler noted, his lips straightening a little, that in the movements of the man at the desk was a deliberation that was almost extravagant. The man was writing, and the pencil in his hand seemed to lag. He studied long over what he wrote, pursing his lips and scratching his head. But not once did he look up at Lawler.

"Wrestling with a mighty problem, Jordan?" finally asked Lawler, his patience strained, his voice in a slow drawl.

The bald man started and glanced up. Instantly, he reddened and looked down again, leaving Lawler to wonder how it was that every official with whom he had conversed within the past few days had exhibited embarrassment.

"Excuse me, Lawler," said Jordan; "I didn't know you was here. I'll be with you in a second—just as soon as I check up this tally. Caldwell drove in here not more'n two hours ago, an' I ain't got his tally straightened up yet."

Lawler turned his back to Warden and gazed out through the open doorway. On the siding was a long string of empty box cars, plainly awaiting Caldwell's cattle.

After a glance at the cars, Lawler wheeled and faced Warden, who was still gazing meditatively downward.

"I see that cars came quickly enough when you ordered them, Warden," he said.

Warden raised his head slowly and gazed straight at Lawler, his eyes gleaming challengingly.

"Yes," he said: "Simmons finally unearthed enough to take care of Caldwell's cattle. There'll be more, as soon as Simmons can find them. And he'll have to find them pretty soon or his company will face a lawsuit. You see, Lawler, I ordered these cars months ago—got a written contract with the railroad company for them. They've got to take care of me."

"I reckon you knew they'd take care of you, Warden. You were as certain of that as you were that they *wouldn't* take care of any owner who wouldn't sell to you."

"What do you mean, Lawler?" demanded Warden, his face flushing.

"What I said, Warden. It takes gall to do what you and your friends are doing. But, given the power, any bunch of cheap crooks could do it. You understand that I'm not complimenting you any."

It was apparent to Warden, as it was apparent to Jordan—who poised his pencil over the pad of papers and did not move a muscle—that Lawler's wrath was struggling mightily within him. It was also apparent that Lawler's was a cold wrath, held in check by a sanity that forbade surrender to it—a sanity that sternly governed him.

It was the icy rage that awes with its intensity; the deliberate bringing to the verge of deadly action the nerves and muscles that yearn for violent expression—

and then holding them there, straining tensely, awaiting further provocation.

Both men knew what impended; both saw in the steady, unwavering gleam of Lawler's eyes the threat, the promise of violence, should they elect to force it.

Jordan was chastened, nerveless. The pencil dropped from his fingers and he slacked in his chair, watching Lawler with open mouth.

Warden's face had grown dead white. The hatred he bore for this man glared forth from his eyes, but the hatred was tempered by a fear that gripped him.

However, Warden was instinctively aware that Lawler would not force that trouble for which he plainly yearned; that he would not use the gun that swung from the leather at his hip unless he or Jordan provoked him to it.

And Warden wore no gun. He felt secure, as he sat for an interval after considering the situation, and yet he did not speak at once. Then, with the urge of his hatred driving him, he said, sneeringly:

"Cheap crooks, eh? Well, let me tell you something, Lawler. You can't intimidate anybody. My business is perfectly legitimate. I am not violating any law. If I have the foresight to contract for cars in time to get them for shipment, that is my business. And if I offer you — or any man — a price, and it doesn't suit you, you don't have to accept it."

He saw a glint of humor in Lawler's eyes — a sign that the man's passions were not to be permitted to break the leash in which he held them — and he grew bolder, his voice taking on a vindictive note.

"And I want to tell you another thing, Lawler. As long as I am resident buyer at Willets you'll never ship a hoof through me. Understand that! You can drive to Red Rock and be damned! If you'd been halfway decent about this thing; if you hadn't come swaggering into my office trying to dictate to me, and calling me a liar, I'd have kept Lefingwell's agreement with you!"

"Then Lefingwell wasn't the liar," smiled Lawler; "you're admitting it."

Warden's face grew poisonously malevolent. He laughed, hoarsely.

"Bah!" he jeered. "We'll say I lied. What of it! I didn't want to antagonize you, then. Only a fool is truthful at all times." He laughed again, mockingly. "I'm truthful when I want to be."

He saw the frank disgust in Lawler's eyes, and the desire to drive it out, to make the man betray some sign of the perturbation that must be in him, drove Warden to an indiscretion.

"You're a wise guy, Lawler," he jeered. "A minute ago you hinted that this thing was being engineered by a bunch of cheap crooks. Call them what you like. They're out to break you—understand? You suspect it, and I'm telling you. You went around last fall with a chip on your shoulder, making trouble for Haughton and his friends. And now they're going to bust you wide open and scatter your remains all over the country. They're going to fix you so that you'll never shoot off your gab about conditions in the state again. Governor—hell! you'll be a bum before that gang gets through with you!"

He paused, breathing rapidly, his face pale with passion; his eyes glowing with hatred, naked and bitter.

He heard Lawler's short, mirthless laugh; he saw Lawler's eyes narrow and gleam with a cold flame as he took a step forward and stood over him.

"Get up, Warden," came Lawler's voice, low and vibrant. "You'll understand what I'm going to say a whole lot better if you're on your feet, like a man."

Warden got up, defiantly, and for an instant the two men stood looking into each other's eyes, both understanding the enmity that was between them, and both seemingly exulting in it.

"I'm thanking you, Warden, for telling me. But I've known, since I talked with Simmons about the cars, just what it all meant. My talks with Hatfield and Governor Haughton convinced me beyond all reasonable doubt. I'm the man they are after, of course. But incidentally, they're going to mulct every other cattle owner in the state. It's a mighty big scheme—a stupendous robbery. The man who conceived it should have been a pirate—he has all the instincts of one.

"But get this straight. You've got to fight me. Understand? You'll drag no woman into it. You went to the Hamlin ranch the other day. God's grace and a woman's mercy permitted you to get away, alive. Don't let it happen again. Just as sure as you molest a woman in this section, just so sure will I kill you no matter who your friends are! Do you understand that, Warden?"

Warden did not move a muscle. He tried to look

steadily into Lawler's eyes, found that he could not endure the terrible intensity of them — and drooped his own, cursing himself for the surrender.

He heard Lawler laugh again, a sound that sent a cold shiver over him; and then he saw Lawler standing beside the desk at which Jordan sat.

"Jordan," said Lawler, shortly; "I want you to vent my cattle. There's eight thousand head, approximately. They're being held just out of town — about a mile. I'd like to have you give me a certificate of ownership tonight, so we can start to drive before daylight."

Jordan's face whitened, and then grew crimson. He essayed to look up, to meet Lawler's eyes, raising his head and then lowering it again without achieving his desire. He cleared his throat, shifted his body and scuffed his feet on the floor. At last, after clearing his throat again, he spoke, huskily:

"We ain't ventin' any trail herds this fall, Lawler."

Lawler stiffened, looked from Jordan to Warden, and then back again at Jordan, who had taken up the pencil again and was nervously tapping with it upon the desk top.

"Not venting trail herds, eh?" said Lawler. "Whose orders?"

"The state inspector — headquarters," replied Jordan, hesitatingly.

"Would you mind letting me see the order, Jordan?" asked Lawler, calmly.

Jordan succeeded in looking up at Lawler now, and there was rage in his eyes — rage and offended dignity.

Both were artificial—Lawler knew it. And his smile as he looked into Jordan's eyes told the other of the knowledge.

Jordan got up, stung by the mockery in Lawler's eyes.

"Hell's fire, Lawler!" cursed Jordan; "can't you take a man's word?" He stepped back, viciously pulled open a drawer in the desk, drew out a paper—a yellow telegraph form, and slapped it venomously down on the desk in front of Lawler.

"It's ag'in' orders, but I'm lettin' you see it. Mebbe you'll take a man's word after this!" he sneered.

Lawler read the order. Then he calmly placed it on the desk. He looked at Jordan, whose gaze fell from his; he turned to Warden, who smiled jeeringly.

"There is nothing like thoroughness, whenever you do anything on a big scale, Warden," he said. "This order forces cattle owners in this section to drive cattle over a trail without proof of ownership. We fought for that vent law for a good many years, as a weapon against rustlers. This order leaves a cattle owner without protection against the horde of rustlers who infest the state. And the order is dated yesterday. This thing begins to look interesting."

He turned and walked out, not glancing back at the two men inside, who stood for a long time looking at each other, smiling.

CHAPTER XI

THE LONG TRAIL

AFTER leaving Jordan and Warden, Lawler walked across the railroad tracks and entered the station, where he sent a telegram to Keppler, the buyer at Red Rock. Then he drew a chair over near the door and sat down to await an answer. At the end of an hour the agent walked over to Lawler and gave him the reply. It was from Keppler, saying that he would be glad to buy all of the Circle L cattle at thirty dollars a head.

Lawler stuck the telegram in a pocket and went out, mounting Red King and riding through Willets. Darkness had come, and there were few persons on the street, and Lawler did not stop. A little later he was talking with Blackburn at the camp fire, his voice low and earnest.

Blackburn's face was seamed with wrath over the news Lawler had communicated.

"So that's the polecat scheme they're runnin'!" he said, hoarsely. "I reckon they know that between here an' Red Rock there's a dozen big gangs of buzzards which make a business of grabbin' cattle from every herd that hits the Tom Long trail!"

"Blackburn," said Lawler gravely; "do you know of any other trail?"

"No; nor you don't neither!" declared the range

boss. "What you meanin'?" he added, peering intently at Lawler.

"It's mighty plain," said Lawler; "if we travel at all, we'll have to take the Tom Long trail. It's been used before, Blackburn, by all the cattle owners in the section—before the railroad came. It hasn't been used much lately, though, and so I reckon it isn't worn out."

"You're startin' at daybreak, I reckon?"

"Yes." Lawler looked straight at the range boss. "Some of the boys who are with us don't know the Tom Long trail, Blackburn. You'd better tell them there are prospects for trouble. No man goes on that trail with my cattle under regular working orders. It's volunteer work. But you might mention to them that if we get through the difference between what Warden offered me and what I get from Keppler, will be divided among the men of the outfit. That will be in addition to regular trail herd wages."

"That's mighty white of you, Boss. But I reckon there'd be no back-slidin'. The boys ain't admirin' the deal you're gettin'. I'm tellin' them."

He took a step away from Lawler, and then halted, uncertainly.

"Lawler," he said; "you've been over the Tom Long trail—you know what it is. There's places where we'll find eight thousand head to be a mighty big herd. A herd that big will be powerful hard to handle in some of them long passes. An' if they'd get in some of that timber we'd never get them out. We've got twenty-eight men. If we'd have an open winter

we'd likely be able to take care of about three thousand head by watchin' them close. Now, if we'd leave about three thousand head at the Circle L— with four or five of the boys to keep an eye on them, that would leave us about twenty-three or twenty-four men for trail herd work. That won't be any too many for five thousand head of cattle on the Tom Long trail. Unless you're figgerin' to hire some hands from another outfit?"

"We're asking no favors," said Lawler. "We're driving five thousand, as you suggest. I'm leaving the selecting of the trail crew to you—you know your men."

At dawn the following morning the big herd was divided into about the proportions suggested by Blackburn. The smaller section, escorted by five disgruntled Circle L cowboys, moved slowly southward, while the main herd headed eastward, flanked at the sides by grim-faced Circle L riders; at the rear by a number of others and by Lawler, Blackburn; the "chuck-wagon" driven by the cook—a portly, solemn-visaged man of forty with a thin, complaining voice; the "hoodlum" wagon, equipped with bedding and a meager stock of medicines and supplies for emergencies—driven by a slender, fiercely mustached man jocosely referred to as "Doc;" and a dozen horses of the *remuda,* in charge of the horse-wrangler and an assistant.

It was the first trail herd that had been started eastward since the coming of the railroad. To some of the Circle L men it was a novel experience—for they had begun range work since the railroad had appeared.

There were several others, rugged, hardy range riders of the days when the driving of a trail herd was an annual experience, it was a harking back to the elemental and the crude, with the attendant hardships and ceaseless, trying work. The younger men were exultant, betraying their exuberance in various ways—shouting, laughing, singing, gayly bantering one another as they capered beside the cattle; but the older men rode grimly on, grinning tolerantly, knowing that the time would come when the faces of the younger men would grow stern and set from the ceaseless activity, the long night watches, the deadly monotony and the thousand inconveniences of the long drive.

Many of Willets' men were watching the departure of the herd. They stood on the street, in doorways; and in some windows were women. For rumor had been whispering during the past few days, and it was known that Kane Lawler had defied the powerful forces which were attempting to control the mediums of trade in the section; and there were many of the watchers who sent silent applause after the departing herd. They were aware of the hazards that confronted Lawler and his men—hazards enough without the additional menace of the invisible power, of which most of the inhabitants of Willets knew nothing.

However, Caldwell knew. He was standing in the doorway of the Willets Hotel; and his face was drawn and seamed with gravity as he watched.

Gary Warden knew. For he stood in the street in front of the Wolf, watching, his eyes glowing with malice.

Singleton knew. He was standing near Warden, in the grip of a malign anticipation. His lips were bestially pouted.

"Showed yellow at the last minute," he whispered to Warden; "only drivin' about half of them. Well, we'll take care of them he's leavin' before the winter's over."

CHAPTER XII

THE NIGHT WIND'S MYSTERY

AFTER the departure of Lawler on the night of Gary Warden's visit to the Hamlin cabin, silence, vast and deep reigned inside. The last golden shadows from the sinking sun were turning somber shades of twilight as Ruth came to the door and peered outward, to see Lawler riding away.

For a long time the girl watched Lawler, her face burning with shame over what had happened, her senses revolting from the realization of the things Lawler knew concerning her father. Then she seated herself on the threshold of the doorway, watching the long shadows steal over the plains.

She loved Lawler; she never had attempted to deny it, not even to herself. And she had found it hard to restrain herself when he had stood outside the door of her room gravely pleading with her. Only pride had kept her from yielding — the humiliating conviction that she was not good enough for him — or rather that her father's crimes had made it impossible for her to accept him upon a basis of equality.

She felt that Lawler would take her upon any terms — indeed, his manner while in the cabin shortly before convinced her of that; but she did not want to go to him under those conditions. She would have felt, always, as though pity for her had influenced him. She

felt that she would always be searching his eyes, looking for signs which would indicate that he was thinking of her father. And he was certain to think of him — those thoughts would come in spite of his efforts to forget; they would be back of every glance he threw at her; they would be lurking always near, to humiliate her. The conviction sent a shudder over her.

The girl's mental processes were not involved; they went directly, unwaveringly, to the truth — the truth as her heart revealed it, as she knew it must be. If there was any subconscious emotion in her heart or mind from which might spring chaotic impulses that would cloud her mental vision, she was not aware of it. Her thoughts ran straight and true to the one outstanding, vivid, and overwhelming fact that she could not marry Kane Lawler because to marry him would mean added humiliation.

Greatness, Ruth knew, was hedged about by simplicity. Lawler was as direct in his attitude toward life — and to herself — as she. There was about him no wavering, no indecision, no mulling over in his mind the tangled threads of thought that would bring confusion. The steel fiber of his being was unelastic. He met the big questions of life with an eagerness to solve them instantly.

He wanted her — she knew. But she assured herself that she could not bring upon him the shame and ignominy of a relationship with a cattle thief, no matter how intensely he wanted her. That would be doing him an injustice, and she would never agree to it.

But it hurt, this knowledge that she could not marry

Lawler; that she must put away from her the happiness that might be hers for the taking; that she must crush the eager impulses that surged through her; that she must repulse the one man who could make her heart beat faster; the man for whom she longed with an intensity that sometimes appalled her.

She got up after a while and lighted an oil-lamp, placing it upon the table in the big room. She closed the door and then dropped listlessly into a chair beside the table, her eyes glistening, her lips quivering.

The future was somber in aspect, almost hopeless, it seemed. And yet into her mind as she sat there crept a determination — a resolution to tell her father what she knew; to tell him that she could no longer endure the disgrace of his crimes.

That meant of course that she would have to leave him, for she knew he was weak, and that he had been drawn into crime and had not the moral strength to redeem himself.

When about midnight she heard the beating of hoofs near the cabin she sat very quiet, rigid, still determined, her eyes flashing with resolution.

She was standing near the door of her room when her father entered, and as he stood for an instant blinking at the light, trying to accustom his eyes to it after riding for some time through the darkness; she watched him, noting — as she had noted many times before — the weakness of his mouth and the furtive gleam of his eyes.

He had not always been like that. Before the death of her mother she had always admired him, aware of

the sturdiness of his character, of his rugged manliness, and of his devotion to her mother.

Adversity had changed him, had weakened him. And now, watching him, noting the glow in his eyes when he saw her—the pathetic worship in them—her heart protested the decision that her cold judgment had made, and she ran to him with a little, quavering, pitying cry and buried her face on his shoulder, shuddering, murmuring sobbingly:

"O Daddy; O Daddy, what have you done!"

He stood rigid, his eyes wide with astonishment, looking down at her as she clung to him as though wondering over a sudden miracle. For he knew she was not an emotional girl, and this evidence of emotion almost stunned him.

"Why, Honey!" He patted her hair and her cheeks and hugged her tightly to him. And presently he gently disengaged himself and held her at arm's length, peering into her face.

And then, when her clear eyes met his—her gaze direct and searching even though her cheeks had paled, his eyes drooped, and his arms fell to his sides.

"I've done enough, Ruth," he said, soberly.

"Why, Daddy—why did you do it? Oh, you have made it so hard for me!"

"There, there, Honey," he consoled, reaching out and patting her shoulders again. "I've been a heap ornery, but it ain't goin' to happen again." His eyes shone through a mist that had come into them.

"I've been talkin' with Kane Lawler, an' he opened my eyes. I've been blind, Ruth—blind to what it all

meant to you. An' from now on I'm goin' straight—straight as a die!

"Ruth," he went on, when he saw incredulity in her gaze; "I wasn't to tell you. I reckon Lawler would half kill me if he know'd I was tellin' you. But there ain't no use, I've got——"

"Did you give your word to Lawler, Daddy?"

"I sure did. But I've got to tell you, Ruth. Mebbe you knowin' will sort of help me to go through with it.

"Kane Lawler was here this mornin'—he come here to see me about a Circle L cow that I was runnin' my brand on the night before. He talked mighty plain to me—an' earnest. He offered me a job over to the Circle L, an' I took it. I rode over there this afternoon an' Lawler's straw boss put me to work. Then tonight Lawler rode in an' took me out by the corral. He gave it to me straight there. He's goin' to restock my place an' give me a chance to get on my feet. He's goin' to put his shoulder behind me, he says, an' make me run a straight trail—takin' a mortgage on the place to secure him. He give me a letter to his mother, sayin' I was to have what stock I wanted. An' I'm to repay him when I get around to it. Honey, I've got a chance, an' I'm never goin' to slip again!"

Ruth walked to the door and threw it open, standing on the threshold and gazing out into the dull moonlight, across the vast sweep of plain from which came the low moaning of the night wind, laden with mystery.

For a long time, as she stood there, pride fought a savage battle with duty. Her face was pallid, her lips tight-clenched, and shame unutterable gripped her. To

be sure, Lawler had enjoined her father to silence, and it was evident that she was not to know. Still, she did know; and Lawler had added an obligation, a debt, to the already high barrier that was between them. Yet she dared not evade the obligation, for that would be robbing her father of a chance over which he seemed to exult, a chance which promised the reformation, for which she had prayed.

Her heart was like lead within her — a dull weight that threatened to drag her down. And yet she felt a pulse of thankfulness. For if her father really meant to try — if he should succeed in redeeming himself in Lawler's eyes and in her own, she might one day be able to go to Lawler with no shame in her eyes, with the comforting assurance that her father had earned the right to hold his head up among men. To be sure, there always would be the shadow of the past mistake lurking behind; but it would be the shadow of a mistake corrected, of a black gulf bridged.

Her father was waiting when she finally turned to him — waiting, his chin on his chest, his face crimson with shame.

"Ruth, girl — you ain't goin' to judge me too harsh, are you?" he begged. Once more she yielded to the pathetic appeal in his eyes. She ran to him again, holding him tightly to her. A cool gust swept in through the open doorway — the night wind, laden with mystery. But the girl laughed and snuggled closer to the man; and the man laughed hoarsely, vibrantly, in a voice that threatened to break.

CHAPTER XIII

THE INVISIBLE MENACE

AT THE close of the second day the big trail herd halted at the edge of the vast level over which it had come. The herd had been driven forty miles. Cattle, men, and horses had passed through a country which was familiar to them; a country featured by long grama grass, greasewood, and cactus plants.

There was no timber on the plains. The gray of the grama grass and the bare stretches of alkali shone white in the glare of a sun that swam in a cloudless sky of deepest azure. Except for the men, the cattle, the horses, and the two slow-moving, awkward-looking canvas-covered wagons, there had been no evidence of life on the great plain. In a silence unbroken save by the clashing of horns, the bleating and bawling of the cattle, the ceaseless creaking of the wagons, and the low voices of the men, the cavalcade moved eastward.

The wind that swept over the plains was chill. It carried a tang that penetrated; that caused the men, especially in the early morning, to turn up the collars of their woolen shirts as they rode; a chill that brought a profane protest from the tawny-haired giant who had disclosed to Lawler the whereabouts of Joe Hamlin that night in the Circle L bunkhouse.

The first camp had been made on the Wolf — at a shallow about five miles north of the Two Bar, Ham-

lin's ranch. And with the clear, sparkling, icy water of the river on his face, and glistening beads of it on his colorless eyelashes, the giant had growled to several of his brother cowboys, who were likewise performing their ablutions at the river:

"This damn wind is worse'n a Kansas regular. You lean ag'in' it an' it freezes you; you turn your back to it an' you've got to go to clawin' icicles out of your back. Why in hell can't they have a wind that's got some sense to it?"

"It ain't c-cold, Shorty," jibed a slender puncher with a saturnine eye and a large, mobile mouth.

"Kells," grinned the giant; "your voice is froze, right now!"

And yet the men enjoyed the cold air. It had a tonic effect upon them; they were energetic, eager, and always ravenously hungry. The cook offered testimony on that subject, unsolicited.

"I never seen a bunch of mavericks that gobbled more grub than this here outfit!" he stated on the second morning. "Or that swilled more coffee," he added. "Seems like all they come on this drive for is to eat!"

Toward the close of the second day corrugations began to appear in the level. Little ridges and valleys broke the monotony of travel; rocks began to dot the earth; the gray grass disappeared, the barren stretches grew larger and more frequent, and the yucca and the lancelike octilla began to appear here and there. The trend of the trail had been upward all afternoon—gradual at first, hardly noticeable. But as the day

drew to a close the cattle mounted a slope, progressing more slowly, and the horses hitched to the wagons began to strain in the harness.

The rise seemed to be endless — to have no visible terminus. For it went up and up until it melted into the horizon; like the brow of a hill against the sky. But when, after hours of difficult travel, herd and men gained the summit, a broad, green-brown mesa lay before them.

The mesa was miles wide, and ran an interminable distance eastward. Looking back over the way they had come, the men could see that the level over which they had ridden for the past two days was in reality the floor of a mighty valley. Far away into the west they could see a break in the mesa — where it sloped down to merge into the plains near Willets. The men knew that beyond that break ran the steel rails that connected the town with Red Rock, their destination. But it was plain to them that the rails must make a gigantic curve somewhere in the invisible distance, or that they ran straight into a range of low mountains that fringed the northern edge of the mesa.

Lawler enlightened the men at the camp fire that night.

"The railroad runs almost straight from Willets," he said. "There's a tunnel through one of the mountains, and other tunnels east of it. And there's a mountain gorge with plenty of water in it, where the railroad runs on a shelving level blasted out of the wall. The mountains form a barrier that keeps Willets and the Wolf River section blocked in that direction. It's

the same south of here, the only difference being that in the south there is no railroad until you strike the Southern Pacific. And that's a long distance to drive cattle."

When the herd began to move the following morning, Blackburn sent them over the mesa for several miles, and then began to head them down a gradual slope, leaving the mesa behind. There was a faint trail, narrow, over which in other days cattle had been driven. For the grass had been trampled and cut to pieces; and in some places there were still prints of hoofs in the baked soil.

The slope grew sharper, narrowing as it descended, and the cattle moved down it in a sinuous, living line, until the leaders were out of sight far around a bend at least a mile distant.

Blackburn was at the head of the herd with three men, riding some little distance in front of the cattle, inspecting the trail. Lawler and the others were holding the stragglers at the top of the mesa, endeavoring to prevent the crowding and confusion which always results when massed cattle are being held at an outlet. It was like a crowd of eager humans attempting to gain entrance through a doorway at the same instant. The cattle were plunging, jostling. The concerted impulse brought the inevitable confusion—a jam that threatened frenzy.

By Lawler's orders the men drew off, and the cattle, relieved of the menace which always drives them to panic in such a situation, began to filter through and to follow their leaders down the narrow trail.

Down, always down, the trail led, growing narrower

gradually, until at last cattle and men were moving slowly on a rocky floor with the sheer wall of the mesa on one side and towering mountains on the other.

The clatter of hoofs, the clashing of horns, the bellowing, the rumble of the wagons over the rocks and the ring of iron-shod hoofs, created a bedlam of sound, which echoed and re-echoed from the towering walls until the uproar was deafening.

Shorty, the tawny-haired giant, was riding close to Lawler.

He never had ridden the trail, though he had heard of it. He leaned over and shouted to Lawler:

"Kinney's cañon, ain't it?"

Lawler nodded.

"Well," shouted Shorty; "it's a lulu, ain't it?"

For a short time the trail led downward. Then there came a level stretch, smooth, damp. The day was hours old, and the sun was directly overhead. But down in the depths of the cañon it was cool; and a strong wind blew into the faces of the men.

The herd was perhaps an hour passing through the cañon; and when Lawler and Shorty, riding side by side, emerged from the cool gloom, they saw the cattle descending a shallow gorge, going toward a wide slope which dipped into a basin of mammoth size.

Lawler knew the place; he had ridden this trail many times in the years before the coming of the railroad; and when he reached the crest of the slope and looked out into the hazy, slumbering distance, he was not surprised, though his eyes quickened with appreciation for its beauty.

Thirty miles of virgin land lay before him, basking in the white sunlight — a green-brown bowl through which flowed a river that shimmered like silver. The dark bases of mountains loomed above the basin at the eastern edge — a serrated range with lofty peaks that glowed white in the blue of the sky. South and north were other mountains — somber, purple giants with pine-clad slopes and gleaming peaks — majestic, immutable.

Looking down from where he sat on Red King, Lawler could see the head of the herd far down the ever-broadening trail. The leaders were so far away that they seemed to be mere dots — black dots moving in an emerald lake.

The cattle, too, had glimpsed the alluring green that spread before them; and at a little distance from Lawler and several of the other men they were running, eager for the descent.

"She's a whopper, ain't she?" said Shorty's voice at Lawler's side. "I've seen a heap of this man's country, but never nothin' like that. I reckon if the Lord had spread her out a little mite further she'd have took in mighty near the whole earth. It's mighty plain he wasn't skimpin' things none, anyway, when he made this here little hollow."

He grinned as he rode, and then waved a sarcastic hand toward the cattle.

"Look at 'em runnin'! You'd think, havin' projected around this here country for a year or so, they'd be better judges. They're thinkin' they'll be buryin' their mugs in that right pretty grass in about fifteen

seconds, judgin' from the way they're hittin' the breeze toward it. An' it'll take them half a day to get down there."

Shorty was a better judge of distance than the cattle. For it was afternoon when the last of the herd reached the level floor of the basin. They spread out, to graze industriously; the men not caring, knowing they would not stray far from such a wealth of grass.

By the time the chuck-wagon had come to a halt and the cook had clambered stiffly from his seat to prepare the noonday meal, Lawler and the others saw the horse-wrangler and his assistant descending the long slope with the *remuda*. The horses had fallen far behind, and Lawler rode to meet them, curious to know what had happened.

When he rode up, the horse-wrangler, a man named Garvin — a stocky individual with keen, inquiring eyes — advanced to meet him.

"Boss," he said, shortly; "there's somethin' mighty wrong goin' on behind us. Me an' Ed — my helper — has been kind of hangin' back, bein' sort of curious. They's a bunch of ornery-lookin' guys trailin' us. I first saw 'em after we'd struck the bottom of that cañon. They was just comin' around that big bend, an' I saw 'em. They lit out, turnin' tail — mebbe figurin' I hadn't seen 'em; but pretty soon I seen 'em again, sort of sneakin' behind us. I reckon if they was square guys they wouldn't be sneakin' like that — eh?"

CHAPTER XIV

LAWLER'S "NERVE"

WHEN Lawler spoke to Blackburn regarding the news that had been communicated to him by the horse-wrangler, Blackburn suggested that himself and several of the Circle L men ride back to ascertain the object of the trailers.

"We'll ride back an' make 'em talk!" he declared, heatedly.

Lawler, however, would not agree, telling Blackburn that the trail was free, and that, until the men made some hostile move, there was no reason why they should be approached.

So the men ate, selected new mounts from their "strings" in the *remuda,* and again started the big herd forward.

Lawler rode for a time with Garvin, keeping an alert eye on the back trail. But though he could see far up the cañon, where the trail—white with dust from the passing of the herd—wound its sinuous way upward into the dark recesses between the towering mesa walls, he could see no sign of life or movement.

The nonappearance of the mysterious riders was suspicious, for if their intentions were friendly they would have come boldly on. In fact, if they were abroad upon an honest errand, they must have found

the slowness of the herd ahead of them irksome; and they would have passed it as soon as possible, merely to escape the dust cloud raised by the cattle.

When the afternoon began to wane the herd was far out in the basin, traveling steadily toward a point where the little river doubled, where Blackburn intended to camp for the night. And though both Blackburn and Lawler scanned the back trail intently at intervals, there was still no sign of the riders Garvin had mentioned.

Nor did the riders pass the herd in the night. Blackburn threw an extra guard around the cattle, making the shifts shorter and more frequent; and when daylight came a short conference among the Circle L men disclosed the news that no riders had passed. If any riders had passed the cowboys must have seen them, for there had been a moon, and the basin afforded in the vicinity of the herd, was clear and unobstructed.

Enraged at the suspicious nature of the incident, Blackburn took half a dozen cowboys and rode back, while the remainder of the trail crew sent the herd eastward. It was late in the afternoon when Blackburn returned, disappointed, grim, and wrathful.

"There's a bunch trailin' us, all right," he told Lawler; "about a dozen. We seen where they'd stopped back in the cañon a ways — where Garvin said he'd seen 'em sneakin' back. We lost their tracks there, for they merged with ours an' we couldn't make nothin' of 'em. But at the foot of the slope we picked 'em up again. Looks like they separated. Some of them went north an' some went south. I reckon that durin' the

night they sneaked around the edge of the basin. It's likely they're hidin' in the timber somewhere, watchin' us. If you say the word I'll take some of the boys an' rout 'em out. We'll find what they're up to, damn 'em!"

"As long as they don't bother us we won't bother them," said Lawler. "It's likely they won't bother us."

Again that night the men worked in extra shifts; and the following morning the herd climbed out of the basin and straggled up a narrow trail through some foothills. At noon they passed through a defile between two mighty mountains; and when twilight came they had descended some low hills on the other side and went to camp for the night on a big grass level near the river they had followed for three days.

The level upon which they camped was much lower than the floor of the big basin, for the water from the river came tumbling out of a narrow gorge between the hills through which the herd had passed.

They were in a wild section, picturesque, rugged. There was plenty of water; and Blackburn and Lawler both knew that there would be water enough for the herd all the way to Red Rock. There was a section of desert before them, which they would strike before many days; but they would cross the desert in one day, barring delay; and there seemed to be no reason why the long drive should not prove successful despite the mountain trails — most of them hazardous — through which they must still pass.

And yet the men were restless. The continued pres-

ence of an invisible menace near them, disturbed the men. They had not seen the mysterious riders again, but there was not a man in the outfit who did not feel them — not a man but was convinced that the riders were still trailing them, watching them.

Long ago the younger men had ceased to laugh and joke. During the day they kept gazing steadily into the gulf of space that surrounded them, carefully scrutinizing the timber and the virgin brush which might form a covert; and at night they were sullen, expectant; every man wearing his gun when he rolled himself in his blanket.

It was not fear that had seized them. They were rugged, hardy, courageous men who had looked death in the face many times, defying it, mocking it; and no visible danger could have disturbed them.

But this danger was not visible; it was stealthy, secret, lurking near them, always threatening, always expected. It might stalk behind them; it might be flanking them as they rode; or it might creep upon them in the night.

Blackburn had fallen into a vicious mood. His eyes glowed with the terrible, futile rage that surged in his veins, it was a reflection of a wrath that grew more and more intolerant as the days passed and the danger that portended did not materialize.

"Boss," he said to Lawler on the tenth day following that on which Garvin had reported the presence of the riders behind them; "the boys is gettin' jumpy. They're givin' one another short answers, an' they're growlin' about things they never noticed before.

"I'm gettin' fed up on this thing, too. It's a cinch them riders is following us. I seen 'em dustin' north of us this mornin'. I ain't said anything to the boys, but it's likely they've seen 'em, too — for they've got their eyes peeled. It's gettin' under my skin, an' if they don't come out into the open pretty soon and give us an idee of what game they're playin', me an' some of the boys is goin' to drag 'em out!"

Yet Blackburn did not carry out his threat. He knew pursuit of the riders would be futile, for there were no further signs of them for several days, and Blackburn knew the riders would have no trouble in eluding them in the vast wilderness through which the herd had been passing for a week. They went on, continuing to watch, though there were no further signs of the men.

They had been on the trail twenty days when at dusk one day they moved slowly down a wide, gradual slope toward a desert. At the foot of the slope was a water hole filled with a dark, brackish fluid, with a green scum fringing its edges. The slope merged gently into the floor of the desert, like an ocean beach stretching out into the water, and for a distance out into the floor of the desert there was bunch grass, mesquite, and greasewood, where the cattle might find grazing for the night. Beyond the stretch of grass spread the dead, gray dust, of the desert, desolate in the filmy, mystic haze that was slowly descending.

The cattle came down eagerly, for they had grazed little during the day in the mountainous region through which they had passed. They were showing the effects of the drive. They had been sleek and fat when

they started from the Circle L; they were growing lean, wild, and they were always ravenously hungry.

But where they could feed they required little attention; and the cowboys, after halting them, helped Garvin establish the lines of a rope corral into which they drove the *remuda*. Then they built a fire and squatted wearily around it — at a respectful distance — to watch the cook — and to listen to him as he complainingly prepared supper.

The men had finished, and the long shadows of the dusk were stealing out over the desert, when Lawler — sitting on the chuck-box — heard Blackburn exclaim sharply:

"*Hell's fire! Here they come!*"

Blackburn had sprung to his feet, his eyes blazing with the pent-up wrath that had been in them for many days. He was tense, his muscles straining; and his fingers were moving restlessly near the butt of the huge pistol that swung at his hip. The fingers were closing and unclosing, betraying the man's passion.

Lawler got to his feet. Following the direction of Blackburn's flaming eyes, he saw, perhaps a mile away, a large body of horsemen. They were descending the long slope over which the herd had been driven.

Lawler counted them — thirty-nine. But the menace was no longer invisible; it was now a material thing which could be met on such terms as might be, with the law of chance to govern the outcome.

Lawler did not doubt that the on-coming riders were hostile. He had felt that when he first had been made aware of their presence behind the herd. He saw, too,

that the men of his outfit felt as he did; for they were all on their feet, their faces grim, their eyes glowing with the rage that had gripped them over the presence of the unseen menace; their muscles were tensed and their lips were in the sullen pout which presages the imminence of action.

Shorty, the tawny giant, was a terrible figure. He seemed to be outwardly cool, and there was not a sign of passion in his manner. His hands swung limply at his sides, not a muscle in his body seeming to move. Unlike the other men, he was calm, seemingly unperturbed. So striking was the contrast between him and the other men that Lawler looked twice at him. And the second time he saw Shorty's eyes—they were gleaming pools of passion, cold, repressed.

"Easy, boys!" Lawler called to the men. "Don't let them suspect you know they've been trailing us. They've got us two to one, almost—if they mean trouble we'll have to work easy!"

He saw the men relax; and several of them resumed their former positions at the fire.

The strange riders were coming steadily onward; they were not more than a hundred yards distant when Blackburn exclaimed, hoarsely:

"Lawler; it's Blondy Antrim an' his gang! Damn his hide! We're in for it!"

For the first time since Garvin had told him of the presence of the men on the trail behind the herd, Lawler's face betrayed passion—the glow in his eyes rivaled that in the giant's.

During the past year or so word had reached him

—rumor unfounded, but insistent—that more than once Singleton and Blondy Antrim, the outlaw, had been seen together. He had placed no credence in the rumors, ascribing them to the imaginations of mischievous brains, prejudiced against Singleton because of his bluff, dominant manner. He first had suspected there might be truth in them when Joe Hamlin had told him that he had rustled cattle for Singleton. He now believed that Singleton had disposed of the stolen cattle through Antrim and the conviction that Singleton was behind the action of the outlaw in trailing the herd through the country seized him.

In an instant—following Blackburn's exclamation—he was aroused to the danger that confronted himself and his men. As though by previous arrangement, the men looked at him, noted the tenseness that had come over him, listened attentively when he spoke.

"Boys; don't offer to throw a gun. I know Antrim. He's a killer, and his men are like him. Take it easy—keep cool. The man who loses his temper will be guilty of the wholesale murder that will follow. When Antrim rides up, send him after me!"

He had not unsaddled Red King. He strode to the horse, swung into the saddle, and rode eastward, away from the advancing riders.

Blank astonishment, puzzled bewilderment shone in the eyes of the Circle L men as they watched him, and into the hearts of some of them crept the conviction that Lawler had deserted them; that he was afraid of the outlaw chief.

Blackburn saw what they thought, and his burning

eyes bored into them with sarcasm unutterable. He laughed, hoarsely, with a grim mirth that startled them.

"Don't you worry about Lawler's nerve, boys; he's got more of it than the bunch of us put together! He's got some scheme in mind. You guys just set tight until you find out what it is. Do as he told you. Don't let that scurvy gang know that you're flabbergasted!"

When Lawler rode away there was a noticeable commotion in the group of advancing horsemen. One of them left the group, spurring his horse in the direction taken by Lawler. He must have been called back, for he wheeled his horse after he had ridden a dozen paces or so, and rejoined the group, which came on as before.

When the horsemen came to a halt near the fire, they were spread in a semi-circle about the Circle L men, and in their bronzed immobile faces was no answer to the question that agitated Blackburn and the other men. They had halted at a little distance from the fire, and one of them, a tall, slender, keen-eyed, thin-lipped man, urged his horse out of the circle and insolently inspected Blackburn and his cowboys. He lounged loosely in the saddle.

There was a sinister light in his eyes, a lurking threat in his manner.

"What outfit is this?" he demanded.

"Circle L, from Wolf River," answered Blackburn.

"Where you headin'?"

"To Red Rock."

"Railroad out of business?" jeered the outlaw.

"Far as the Circle L is concerned, it is, Antrim," smiled Blackburn. "We had a fuss, an' quit 'em."

The outlaw peered intently at the other. Then he grinned.

"It's Andy Blackburn!" he said. "Glad to meet you, Blackburn. This seems like old times — before the railroad went through; when old Luke Lawler used to jam 'em to Red Rock — sometimes — when he didn't pick up too many strays on the way." He laughed as though pleased over the recollection. "Got this stock vented, Blackburn?"

"Nary a vent, Antrim; the inspector wasn't feelin' in the humor."

"Ha!" exclaimed Antrim; "so you didn't get no vent. Well, we're aimin' to look through your herd. We've been missin' cattle all summer — from my ranch, the Circle Bar. About three thousand head. We've traced 'em as far as Kinney's cañon, an' lost 'em. But we've been thinkin', Blackburn, that it ain't no hard job to make a passable Circle L out of a Circle Bar. That's why we aim to look your cattle over."

He grinned slightly at Blackburn's scowl, aware of the impotent rage the latter felt over the worst insult that could be offered an honest cattleman. For an instant he watched Blackburn keenly, his lips sneering; and then when he saw that Blackburn had mastered his rage, he said, sharply:

"Who was that guy that rode away as we come up?"

"Lawler," said Blackburn. "He's figgurin' on seein' you alone, looks like. He left word that when you come I was to tell you he wanted to see you."

The outlaw's eyes glowed with swift suspicion.

"He knowed me, eh?" he said. He glanced keenly

over the level floor of the desert. Dimly, in the dusk, he could see Lawler riding near the herd. For an instant Antrim hesitated, plainly debating the wisdom of leaving his men; then he smiled with whimsical recklessness. And his movements became rapid, jerky.

"Slade," he said, addressing a rider near him; "you're runnin' things till I get back."

He wheeled his horse and sent him into the dusk toward the herd, riding cautiously, evidently not entirely convinced of the peaceableness of Lawler's intentions.

He rode a quarter of a mile before he came upon Lawler; and though the light was fading he could plainly see Lawler's face, set, expressionless.

The outlaw brought his horse to a halt within three or four paces of Red King. Antrim's manner exuded the insolent tolerance of the master, who has the confidence that comes from thoughts of an overwhelming advantage.

He knew Lawler; knew him as perhaps no other man in the section knew him. For he had seen Lawler using his gun. It had been some years before, when Lawler had been proving himself — proving that he had a right to the respect and consideration of his fellow-men; proving that no man could trifle with him.

Antrim had been a witness to the shooting. He had marked Lawler's coolness, the evenness of his temper; and had noted the deadly swiftness and precision of his movements when he had drawn his pistol. Lawler had not been the aggressor — a dozen other men had testified to that.

Antrim had not seen Lawler since, until now. And as he looked at him he saw that the years had brought a change in the man. He had been a tall, bold, reckless-looking youth then, with a certain wild waywardness in his manner that might have destroyed him, had he yielded to it. Now he was cold, calm, deliberate, imperturbable. The recklessness had disappeared from his eyes; they were now aglow with quiet determination. The waywardness had gone—ironlike resolution marked his manner.

And yet behind it all, Antrim could see the threat of those youthful passions; the lurking eagerness for violent action; the hint of preparedness, of readiness.

Antrim was startled, uneasy. He saw now that he should not have left his men; that he had made a mistake in coming alone to meet Lawler.

He was certain of it now, when he heard Lawler's voice, saw the cold, smiling light in his eyes.

"You're wanting my cattle, Antrim. Your men have been trailing me for two weeks. You don't get them. You've got thirty-nine men, and there are only twenty-three Circle L men over there. I'm not getting any of them killed. This thing is between you and myself. Get your hand away from your gun or I'll bore you!"

He moved his hand—where it had been—seemingly—lying on Red King's neck, under the mane; and Antrim saw the dark muzzle of a pistol showing in the hand.

"I'm not taking any chances, Antrim—you can see that. I'm not going to take any. If you do anything to attract the attention of your men, I'll kill you. Drop

your guns, using your thumbs and forefingers." He waited, watching keenly, until the outlaw had complied with the demand, the two big pistols thudding dully into the sand beside his horse.

Then Lawler resumed, his voice low and even, as before:

"Now we're riding back to the fire, Antrim. Listen hard, for this means life or death to you.

"We're going back to the fire. You're going to act as though nothing had happened; and you are to tell your men that you have changed your mind about the cattle—you are to tell them that you are going with me to Red Rock; and you are sending them back to where you came from, to wait for you."

Antrim stiffened, and his face bloated poisonously. But he did not answer, for there was that in Lawler's eyes that convinced him of the futility of attempting resistance.

"You're going to Red Rock with me," went on Lawler. "I'm going to be personally responsible for you. I'm going to watch you; you're going to ride ahead of me. If you talk, or make any motion that brings any of your men back, you'll die so quick you won't know it happened! Do you understand?"

"Damn you, Lawler; you'll pay for this!" muttered the outlaw. "I'll go on your trail and I'll never let up till I get you!"

Lawler laughed, lowly. "Just be careful not to get any of that poison in your voice when you tell your men what I told you, Antrim, or you'll never go on anybody's trail. Get going, now; and be careful."

Antrim wheeled his horse, and Lawler spurred Red King beside him.

"I'll be watching you, Antrim," he warned. "If your men show they suspect anything wrong you go down, mighty rapid. You don't get off your horse until your men go. And there is to be no playing for time. You talk fast and earnest, and carefully. Go ahead."

Riding slightly in Antrim's rear, Lawler followed the outlaw to the fire. There had come no change in the positions of the outlaws or of the Circle L men. And when Antrim and Lawler rode up there was a silence during which the men of both factions looked interrogatively at their leaders.

Antrim's face was pale, and his voice was vibrant with emotion. But he did not hesitate.

"Slade," he said to the man he had left in charge; "I've changed my mind about those cattle. Lawler has given me proof that none of our stock is with them. I'm hittin' the trail to Red Rock with Lawler. You take the boys back to the ranch an' wait for me."

Slade's eyes widened; he flushed and peered keenly at Antrim. "You — why, hell's fire, Antrim; we ——"

"Slade, do as I tell you!" said Antrim, coldly. "Are you runnin' my affairs? You hit the breeze, right now — you hear me!"

Slade grinned venomously, and waved a violent hand around the circle. "You hear your boss, boys!" he said; "Slope!"

The men hesitated an instant, sending sharp, incredulous glances at their leader. But Antrim, pale, know-

ing that if he betrayed the slightest sign of insincerity his men would suspect, met their looks steadily. The men wheeled their horses, muttering profanely, and rode slowly westward into the growing darkness.

When they had disappeared, Lawler smiled faintly at the outlaw chief.

"You can get down, now, Antrim." He drew the pistol from Red King's mane, where it had been concealed during Antrim's talk with his men, and sheathed it. And then Blackburn, who had been a silent, amazed witness to what had occurred, whistled softly, covertly poking Shorty in the ribs.

"There's one thing that's as good as a vent, ain't there, Shorty?" he said. "That's a gun in the hand of a man who's got plenty of nerve!"

CHAPTER XV

CONCERNING AN OUTLAW

EARLY in the afternoon of the first day of December the sky darkened, and a cold, raw wind began to shriek through Willets. The company corral was empty; and again, as on the day before Kane Lawler had visited him, Gary Warden stood at one of the windows of his office smiling. Warden was almost satisfied.

Only one disturbing thought persistently recurred; Lawler had got his cattle through to Red Rock.

A crimson stain appeared in Warden's cheeks as his thoughts reverted to Lawler's return to Willets, after disposing of his cattle to the Red Rock buyer. And Warden's shoulders sagged a little, the smile faded and he glared malignantly at the bleak, gray clouds that sailed over town on the chill, bitter wind.

Oddly, at the instant Warden's memory was dwelling upon the incident of Lawler's return to Willets, Lafe Corwin, the storekeeper, was mentally reviewing the incident.

Willets was a cow-town, and for the winter its activity was over. All the beef cattle in the section, with the exception of three thousand head still held by Lawler, at the Circle L, had been shipped eastward, and Willets would now descend to supine indifference to considerations of gain.

Lafe Corwin was tilted back in a big wooden chair near the big, roaring-hot stove in the lounging-room of the Willets Hotel. His clerk could attend to the store. Until spring came, Corwin would spend much of his leisure near the big stove in the hotel, talking politics and cattle — two subjects of paramount importance.

But just at this instant Corwin was thinking of Lawler's return to Willets. Little wrinkles gathered around his eyes — which were twinkling; and he chuckled lowly as his gaze roved from one to the other of the men who, like himself, were enjoying the warmth of the stove and listening, between words, to the howling and moaning of the wind.

Three or four times, during silences, Corwin chuckled. And when at last he saw Dave Rankin, the blacksmith, watching him curiously, he guffawed aloud, rubbing his hands gleefully.

"I don't reckon I ever seen no mournfuller sight than that!" he declared.

"Meanin' which?" asked the blacksmith, his eyes alight with truculent inquiry. The others sat erect, attentive.

"Meanin' that mornin' when Kane Lawler hopped off the train with his bunch of cowhands — an' Blondy Antrim," snickered Corwin. "Dave Singleton an' Gary Warden an' Jordan an' Simmons an' that pony-built girl which is stayin' over to the Two Diamond with that ossified woman she calls 'Aunt Hannah,' was on the platform waitin' for the six o'clock train from the east. It appears that pony-built — Della Wharton, her name is — was expectin' some gimcracks, an' Warden

an' her was waitin' for them. Anyways, they was there. It sure was medium mournful!" declared Corwin.

He appeared to hesitate; and Rankin grinned.

"We've heard it before; but I reckon we can stand listenin' ag'in. Tell it, Corwin."

"As I was sayin' when you interrupted me — it was medium mournful," resumed Corwin. "Shorty — who was with Lawler on the drive — has told me since; but at that time I didn't know — that Jordan had refused to vent Lawler's cattle.

"Well, I'd come down to see the train come in, too. We was all standin' there when she come a-steamin' up, an' stopped. An' who clumb off but Lawler an' his trail crew — twenty-three of 'em. An' Blondy Antrim in the midst of 'em, lookin' like a sheep-killin' dog.

"Well, gentlemen, they was a scene. Warden got his face all screwed up an' couldn't get it unscrewed ag'in. He looked like he'd swallered a hot brandin' iron an' it didn't lay easy on his stummick. Singleton was a-standin' there with his mouth open an' his eyes a-poppin' out; an' Jordan was plumb flabbergasted. Simmons was leanin' ag'in' the side of the station buildin', lookin' like he was expectin' to be shot the next minute.

"That Della Wharton girl was the only one that seemed to have any wits a-tall. I seen her grin eloquent at Lawler, an' look him straight in the eye like she was tellin' him somethin' intimate.

"Well, as I was sayin', Lawler an' his boys got off with Blondy Antrim. Antrim looks wild an' flighty — like you've seen a locoed steer on the prod. His eyes

was a-glarin' an' he was mutterin' cusses by the mouthful. All of which didn't seem to faze Lawler none.

"Lawler was as cool as an iceberg which had just arrove from the North Pole — an' then some. An' he got a mean, mild grin on his face when he saw the reception committee that had come to meet him. They was a twinkle in his eyes when he looked at Della Wharton; but when Warden blows into his line of vision he looked mighty wicked.

"Lawler an' his gang had brought their hosses from Red Rock in two cars — they'd sold some of the *remuda* in Red Rock, not carin' to ship 'em home. Anyways, the gang didn't appear in no hurry to unload the hosses; an' a trainman yells to them, sayin' they'd have to hurry.

"But the boys was too interested just then. 'Unload 'em yourself, you sufferin' yap!' yells Shorty. 'If you pull out of here with them hosses I'll blow your damned railroad over into the next county!' Shorty sure does love the railroad!

"As I was sayin' when you interrupted me: Lawler looked mighty wicked. But he's cold an' polite — an' ca'm. An' he escorts Antrim over to where Warden was standin', an' says, quiet an' low:

"Warden, I have brought back my vent. He sure was a heap of trouble, an' he got himself attached to us right close. But as we haven't got no further use for him we're turnin' him over to you. I reckon he's lookin' to you an' Singleton to pay him for the trouble of trailin' us for two weeks, an' for keepin' me company as far as Red Rock, to see that my herd got there right an' proper. 'Antrim,' he says; 'go to your

boss!' And he gives him a little shove toward Warden.

"Warden didn't say nothin'—he'd lost his voice, I reckon. But Antrim goes off the handle complete.

"'The damned sneak lifted my guns!' he yells.

"'You wantin' a gun?' says Lawler, cold an' ca'm. He backs up an' lifts one of Shorty's. Then he walks close to Antrim an' shoves it into his right hand.

"'There's a gun, you polecat,' he says. 'Fan it. I'd admire to blow the gizzard outen you!'

"But Antrim didn't seem to be none tickled, now that he'd got the gun. He stood, lookin' at it, like it was somethin' strange an' unusual, an' he was wonderin' whether he ought to hang onto it or drop it. Finally he grins sorta sheepishlike, an' hands it back to Lawler, butt first.

"'I ain't aimin' to fight you today, Lawler,' he says, his face bloomin' like a cactus.

"Lawler laughs, an' gives Shorty his gun back. Shorty grins like a tiger. 'Mebbe Singleton wouldn't mind acceptin' your kind offer, Boss?' he says.

"But Singleton don't break his neck reachin' for *his* gun, neither. He stands there, lookin' like a calf that's lost its mother. An' then Lawler laughs again, an' says:

"'Well, boys, seein' that the reception committee has received us, an' the honors has all been done, I reckon we'd better get the hosses off the cars an' hit the breeze for home!'

"An' they done so. But before they went they smoked up the town considerable—as you all seen.

Them boys had divided twenty-five thousand dollars between them, which Lawler give 'em for makin' the drive. An' they sure did celebrate. Except Lawler. He went right home, an' I ain't seen him since. But I reckon Warden an' the rest of them ain't had no regrets. I ain't never seen no mournfuller sight than them folks sneakin' away from the station. All but Della Wharton. She was a-grinnin' sorta slylike, as though somethin' pleased her."

CHAPTER XVI

A "NORTHER"

WHEN Lawler returned to the Circle L ranch-house he found that Mary had gone East, to school. She had left for Willets on the second day following Lawler's departure; and Mrs. Lawler had already received two letters from her. Mrs. Lawler watched her son keenly when she told him that Joe Hamlin had brought a letter stating that Hamlin was to be permitted to take a number of mixed cattle from the Circle L — and that he had driven away one hundred. She smiled gently when she told Lawler that on the day before her departure Mary had visited Ruth Hamlin — had spent the whole day with her, and had come home, mysteriously delighted. Ruth had given up the school.

"Mary loves her, Kane," said Mrs. Lawler. And she smiled again when she saw a flush reach Lawler's face.

Lawler intended to ride to the Hamlin cabin this morning. It was the third day following his arrival at the ranch; and until now he had had no time for anything except to attend to the many details of work that had been neglected during his absence.

There were still three thousand head of cattle on the Circle L range — the men had held them in the valley for a time during his absence on the trail, but the grass

had grown sparse, and the herd was now grazing on the big plain beyond the northern slope of the valley.

During the time he had been home the outfit had been busy. The Circle L had a dozen line camps—little adobe cabins scattered over the range, occupied during the winter by Circle L cowboys whose duty it was to guard the cattle against the aggressions of timber wolves, rustlers, cold, and starvation.

For two days the chuck-wagon had been sent rattling to the various line camps, stocking them with supplies against the winter. As the weather was threatening the hoodlum wagon had been pressed into service this morning; and all the men, with the exception of the blacksmith—who was working diligently in his shop near the corral; and two punchers—Davies and Harris, who had been assigned to Number One camp—were away with the two wagons.

Davies and Harris had not been able to resist the lure of "town." The prosperity that had descended upon them had made them restless, and the night before they had importuned Lawler to permit them to spend "one more night in town before holin' up for the winter."

Lawler had consented; and now he was wishing that he hadn't. For when he emerged from the ranch-house this morning he saw a dark cloud bank far in the north, moving southward on the chill wind.

The herd, he knew, was somewhere on the big level beyond the slope of the valley, in the vicinity of Number One line camp. It was an isolated section, off the trail that led to town—a section of featureless level

near a big break in the valley. The break opened upon another big level that stretched southward for a hundred miles. In other days Luke Lawler had lost many cattle here; they had drifted through the break by hundreds, with a blizzard behind them; and had been swallowed by the great waste.

Two years before — aware of the previous losses — Lawler had erected a wire fence across the big break, extending from a craggy mountain wall on the western end, to a sheer butte that marked the end of the break, eastward.

Lawler had sent Red King to the crest of the valley on his way to the Hamlin cabin, when he noted that the cloud bank in the north had grown denser, nearer. The wind had increased in velocity, and he had to lean against it as he rode; and it was so cold and raw that he drew his heavy cap down over his eyes to shield them, and drew over his mouth the heavy woolen scarf he wore around his neck.

He rode on a short distance, casting troubled glances into the north. He found himself wondering if Davies and Harris had gone to the line camp. If they hadn't, and a storm broke, the herd on the big level was in danger.

He brought Red King to a halt. The big horse pranced, whistling eagerly. He champed on the bit, tossed his head, raising it finally and staring straight into the north.

"You see it too, eh, King?" said Lawler. "Well, we can't take that chance; we'll have to go to the camp."

He headed Red King down into the valley again, where the bitter wind did not strike them, riding westward rapidly.

It was noon before Lawler and Red King had traveled half the distance to the line camp. A dull, gray haze was sweeping southward. It mingled with the southern light and threw a ghostly glare into the valley, making distance deceptive, giving a strange appearance to the landmarks with which Lawler and the horse were familiar.

Lawler increased Red King's pace. He saw that the storm was nearer than he had thought, and he would have to work fast to get the cattle headed into the valley before it broke.

The distance from the Circle L ranchhouse to the big plain near the line cabin was about fifteen miles, and the trail led upward in a long, tiresome rise. Yet Red King struck the level with a reserve strength that was betrayed by the way he fought for his head as he saw the level stretch before him. He was warmed up —he wanted to run.

But Lawler drew him down in an effort to locate the herd before he started toward it.

Man and horse made a mere blot on the yawning expanse of land that stretched away from them in all directions. A lone eagle in the sky or a mariner adrift on a deserted sea could not have seemed more isolated than Lawler and Red King. In this limitless expanse of waste land horse and rider were dwarfed to the proportion of atoms. The yawning, aching, stretching miles of level seemed to have no end.

Several miles into the north Lawler saw the herd. Directly westward, at a distance of about a mile, he saw the line cabin. No smoke was issuing from the chimney; and so far as he could discern, there were no men with the cattle.

Harris and Davies had overstayed. That knowledge might have been responsible for the grim humor in Lawler's eyes; but the rigidness of his body and the aggressive thrust to his chin were caused by knowledge of a different character. The storm was about to break.

The sun was casting a dull red glow through the gray haze. It was blotted out as he looked. Southward from the horizon ends extended a broad sea of shimmering, glittering sky that contrasted brilliantly to the black, wind-whipped clouds that had gathered in the north. Fleecy gray wisps, detached from the heavy, spreading mass northward, were scurrying southward, streaking the shimmering brilliance and telling of the force of the wind that drove them.

A wailing note came from the north, a sighing vague with a portent of force; a whisper of unrest, a promise of fury. Far in the north, its blackness deepening with distance, stretched the menace, arousing awe with its magnitude.

Nature seemed to know what impended, for on the vast level where the storm would have a clear sweep the dried grass, bronzed by the searing autumn sun, was rustling as it bent far southward; the hardy sage bowed reluctantly to the fitful blasts, and the scraggly, ugly yucca resentfully yielded to the unseen force.

A wide, shallow gully ran northwestward from a

point near Red King, almost in a straight line toward the herd. Lawler urged the big horse into the gully and rode hard. The distance was several miles, but when Red King came to the gully end he flashed out of it like a streak of red flame. He was drawn down, instantly, however, snorting and pawing impatiently, while Lawler shielded his eyes with his hands and again scanned the country.

He saw the herd; and as he watched it began to move. There were no men near the cattle.

They started slowly, seemingly reluctant to leave the level. They moved sullenly, closely massed, their heads lowered, their tails drooping. The wind, now beginning to carry a vicious note with its whine, drove a heavy dust cloud against them, warning them. The wind was icy, giving the cattle a foretaste of what was to come. And mingling with the dust were fine, flinty snow particles that came almost horizontally against their rumps, stinging them, worrying them. They increased their pace, and soon were running with a swinging, awkward stride, straight toward the wire fence, several miles distant.

If they saw Lawler they gave no sign, for they went lumbering on, snorting and bawling their apprehension.

Lawler was about to start Red King toward them, when he noted movement on the level a little northwestward from the cattle. Peering intently, he saw two horsemen racing southward, a little distance ahead of the cattle, parallel with them.

At first Lawler was certain the men were Davies and Harris, and he smiled, appreciating their devotion to

duty. But when he saw them race past the cattle, not even halting to head them in the right direction — which would have been slightly eastward, so that they would enter the valley before reaching the fence — he frowned, wheeled Red King sharply, and sent him back into the gully from which he had emerged.

"They're strangers, King," he said, shortly to the horse as the latter fled headlong down the gully toward the point from which he had started; "Davies and Harris wouldn't leave the herd with that norther coming on."

The big horse made fast time down the gully. He brought Lawler to a point near the fence where it crossed the gully at about the instant the two riders were dismounting some distance away.

Lawler rode out of the gully and brought Red King to a halt. There was no danger that the two men would discover him, for all objects in the vicinity were rapidly being blotted out by the dancing smother of dust that was riding the north wind. Lawler was to the north of the men, slightly eastward, and they could not have faced the smother of dust to look toward him.

Lawler could dimly see the herd moving toward the fence; he could see the men plainly; and as he watched them his eyes narrowed. The big horse leaped with the word he caught from his rider's lips, racing lightly with the wind toward the fence where the men were working.

Lawler's approach was noiseless, for all sound was engulfed in the steady, roaring whine of the storm. Neither of the two men, working at the fence, heard

Lawler as he brought the big horse to a halt within half a dozen paces of them.

The taller of the two, plying a pair of wire-nippers, completed his work at a fence post and turned to leap toward another. The movement brought him against the muzzle of Lawler's horse. He halted jerkily, retreated a step, and looked up, to see Lawler looking at him from behind the muzzle of the big pistol that had leaped into his hand.

There was no word spoken — none could be heard at the moment. What followed was grim pantomime, with tragedy lurking near.

The tall man held his position. He had tentatively extended his right hand, the fingers spread, clawlike. Now the hand was going upward, accompanied by the other. When the man had stepped backward to escape a collision with Lawler's horse, the wind had whipped his hat from his head. He now stood there, his hair waving to the vicious whims of the gale, veiling his eyes and he not daring to lower his hands to brush it away.

The shorter man, too, had assumed a statuesque pose. He had turned when he had noted his companion's startled movement, and he, too, had seen an apparition that had sent his hands swiftly upward.

The big horse stood motionless, his back to the wind. He did not move as Lawler leaped from his back — smoothly, quickly, his eyes alert, his muscles tensed for violent action.

The men stood rigid while Lawler jerked their pistols from their holsters and tossed them into the dust waves that danced and swirled around them. The

short man was catapulted against the tall one with a viciousness that staggered both; and then they heard Lawler's voice, sharp and penetrating, above the shrieking of the wind:

"Those cattle will be here in five minutes! If you don't have that fence repaired before then, you drift with them, hoofing it!"

In the allotted time they repaired the fence, working with breathless energy, while Lawler stood near, the menacing gun in hand, a saturnine smile wreathing his face.

When the herd reached the fence there was no break in it. More—where the break had been were three men on horses who took instant charge, easing the cattle down along the fence, heading them eastward toward the shelter they were sure to find if they kept going.

The three men followed the cattle for a mile—until they were going straight and fast toward the home ranch. Then Lawler, smiling with bitter humor, motioned the men toward the back trail.

They seemed to know what was demanded of them. They wheeled their horses, sending them into the billowy white smother that was now coming in a gigantic wave toward them.

The southern light had gone. A dense blackness, out of which roared a gale that robbed them of their breath, struck them. The snow was hurled against them like a sand blast, biting deep, blinding them.

It took them more than an hour to travel the distance that lay between the point at which they had cut the

fence, and the line cabin. And when they reached a windbreak near the structure the two men rode behind it, silent, thankful.

Lawler had ridden forth, prepared for bad weather. His face was now muffled in a huge scarf that encircled his neck, and his eyes were shielded by the peak of the fur cap he wore. He dismounted, waved the men toward a dugout, and watched them as they dismounted and led their horses through a narrow door. When the men emerged Lawler led the big red horse in, leaving the men to stand in the white gale that enveloped them.

The wind was now roaring steadily, and with such force that no man could have faced it with uncovered face. It came over the vast emptiness of the northern spaces with a fury that sent into one the consciousness that here was an element with which man could not cope.

Lawler emerged from the dugout and closed the door behind him. He barred it, turned and motioned the two men toward the cabin. He followed them as they opened the door and entered. Then, after closing the door and barring it, he lifted the peak of his cap, removed the scarf from his neck, glanced around the interior of the cabin and looked coldly at the men.

"Well," he said; "there's a heap of explaining to be done. You can begin now — one at a time!"

CHAPTER XVII

THE LINE CABIN

THE two men had walked to a point near the big fireplace that occupied the greater part of one end of the cabin. The hatless one, big, assertive, belligerent, grinned defiantly, saying nothing in answer to Lawler's words.

The other man, slighter, and plainly apprehensive, glanced swiftly at his companion; then dropped his gaze to the floor.

"You skunks bunked here last night!" charged Lawler, sharply. "When I was here, yesterday, these bunks were made up. Look at them now! Talk fast. Were you here last night?"

The smaller man nodded.

"Why didn't you cut the fence last night?"

The smaller man grinned. "We wasn't aimin' to get caught."

"Expected there'd be line riders here, eh?"

The other did not answer. Lawler watched both men derisively.

"Then, when you saw no one was here, and that it was likely the norther would keep anyone from coming, you cut the fence. That's it, eh?"

The two men did not answer, regarding him sullenly.

Lawler smiled. This time there was a cold mirth in his smile that caused the two men to look quickly at

each other. They paled and scowled at what they saw in Lawler's eyes.

Half a dozen bunks ranged the side walls of the cabin, four on one side, two on the other, arranged in tiers, upper and lower. A rough, square table stood near the center of the room, with a low bench on one side of it and several low chairs on the other. A big chuck-box stood in a corner near the fireplace, its top half open, revealing the supplies with which the receptacle was filled; some shelves on the other side of the fireplace were piled high with canned foods and bulging packages. The bunks were filled with bedclothing; and an oil-lamp stood on a triangular shelf in a corner near the door. The walls were bare with the exception of some highly colored lithographs that, evidently, had been placed there by someone in whom the love of art still flourished.

It was cold in the cabin. A window in the north wall, with four small panes of glass in it, was slowly whitening with the frost that was stealing over it. In the corners of the mullions were fine snow drifts; and through a small crevice in the roof a white spray filtered, ballooning around the room. The temperature was rapidly falling.

During the silence which followed Lawler's words, and while the two fence cutters watched each other, and Lawler, all caught the voice of the storm, raging, furious, incessant.

With his free hand Lawler unbuttoned his coat, tossed his cap into a bunk and ran a hand through his hair, shoving it back from his forehead. His move-

ments were deliberate. It was as though catching fence cutters was an everyday occurrence.

Yet something in his eyes — the thing the two men had seen — gave the lie to the atmosphere of deliberate ease that radiated from him. In his eyes was something that warned, that hinted of passion.

As the men watched him, noting his muscular neck and shoulders; the slim waist of him, the set of his head — which had that hint of conscious strength, mental and physical, which marks the intelligent fighter — they shrank a little, glowering sullenly.

Lawler stood close to the door, the pistol dangling from his right hand. He had hooked the thumb of the left hand into his cartridge belt, and his eyes were gleaming with feline humor.

"There's a heap to be told," he said. "I'm listening."

A silence followed his words. Both men moistened their lips; neither spoke.

"Get going!" commanded Lawler.

"We was headin' south," said the small man. "We cut the fence to git through."

Lawler's eyelids flickered slightly. The heavy pistol swung upward until the dark tube gaped somberly into the small man's eyes.

"I've got loads of time, but I don't feel like wasting it," said Lawler. "You've got one minute to come clean. Keep your traps shut for that time and I bore you — both — and chuck you outside!"

His smile might have misled some men, but the small man had correctly valued Lawler.

"Gary Warden hired us to cut the fence."

The man's voice was a placative whine. His furtive eyes swept Lawler's face for signs of emotion.

There were no signs. Lawler's face might have been an expressionless mask. Not a muscle of his body moved. The offense was a monstrous one in the ethics of the country, and the fence cutter had a right to expect Lawler to exhibit passion of some kind.

"Gary Warden, eh?" Lawler laughed quietly. "If you're lying——"

The man protested that he was telling the truth.

At this point the tall man sneered.

"Hell," he said; "quit your damn blabbin'!"

"Yes," grinned Lawler, speaking to the small man. "You're quitting your talk. From now on your friend is going to do it. I'm asking questions a heap rapid, and the answers are going to jump right onto the tails of the questions. If they don't, I'm going to see how near I can come to boring a hole in the place where he has his brains cached."

The man glared malignantly at Lawler; but when the first question came it was answered instantly:

"How much did Warden pay you?"

"A hundred dollars."

"When were you to cut the fence?"

"When the norther struck."

"You saw us cache grub in the cabin?"

The man nodded.

"What if you had found a couple of line riders here? What were you told to do if you found line riders here? I'm wanting the truth—all of it!"

The man hesitated. Lawler's pistol roared, the concussion rocking the air of the cabin. The man staggered back, clapping a hand to his head, where, it seemed to him, the bullet from the pistol had been aimed.

The man brought up against the rear wall of the cabin, beside the fireplace; and he leaned against it, his face ghastly with fright, his lips working soundlessly. The little man cowered, plainly expecting Lawler would shoot him, too. And Lawler's gun did swing up again, but the voice of the tall man came, blurtingly:

"Warden told us to knife any men we found here."

Lawler's lips straightened, and his eyes glowed with a passion so intense that the men shrank, gibbering, in the grip of a mighty paralysis.

Lawler walked to the table and sat beside it, placing the gun near his right hand. The men watched him, fascinated; noting his swift movements as he plunged a hand into a pocket and drew out a small pad of paper and a pencil. He wrote rapidly upon a leaf of the pad; then got up, stepped back and ordered the tall man to approach the table.

"Write your name below what I have written—and date it."

When both men had signed the paper, Lawler folded it, stuck it between some leaves of the pad, and replaced pad and pencil in his pocket.

"That's all," he said. "You'll hang out here until the norther blows itself out; then you'll hit the trail to town and tell your story to the sheriff. I'll be doing the honors."

He sheathed his gun and flung open the door, stepping back as a white avalanche rushed in; grinning broadly as he saw the men shrink from it. He divined that the men thought he was going to force them out into the storm immediately, and he grinned coldly.

"You can be tickled that I'm not sending you out into it, to drift with the cattle you tried to kill," he said. "You'd deserve that, plenty. You'll find wood beside the dugout. Get some of it in here and start a fire. Move; and don't try any monkey business!"

He closed the door as the men went out. He had no fear that they would try to escape — even a threat of death could not have forced them to leave the cabin.

When they came in they kindled a fire in the big fireplace, hovering close to it after the blaze sprang up, enjoying its warmth, for the interior of the cabin had become frigid.

Lawler, however, did not permit the men to enjoy the fire. He sent them out for more wood, and when they had piled a goodly supply in a corner, and had filled a tin water pail from a water hole situated about a hundred feet straight out from the door of the cabin, he sent them again to the dugout after their ropes. With the ropes, despite the sullen objections of the men, he bound their hands and feet tightly, afterward picking the men up and tossing them ungently into upper bunks on opposite sides of the room.

He stood, after watching them for a time, his face expressionless.

"That's just so you won't get to thinking you are company," he said. "We're holed up for a long time,

maybe, and I don't want you to bother me, a heap. If you get to bothering me—disturbing my sleep trying to untangle yourselves from those ropes, why——"

He significantly tapped his pistol. Then he pulled a chair close to the fire, dropped into it, rolled a cigarette, and calmly smoked, watching the white fleece trail up the chimney.

CHAPTER XVIII

STORM-DRIVEN

FOR an hour there was no sound in the cabin. Lawler smoked several cigarettes. Once he got up and threw more wood upon the fire, standing in front of the blaze for several minutes stretching his long legs, watching the licking tongues as they were sucked up the chimney by the shrieking wind.

Then, for a time, he lounged in the chair, gazing meditatively at the north window, noting how the fine, frozen snow meal clung to the glass; watching the light fade, listening to the howling white terror that had seized the world in its icy grip.

At the end of an hour it grew dark in the cabin. Lawler got up, lighted the kerosene lamp, placed it on the table, seated himself on a bench and again meditatively watched the leaping flames in the fireplace.

Satisfaction glowed in his eyes as he thought of what would have happened had he not decided to substitute for Davies and Harris. Undoubtedly by this time the two men were on their way to the camp. They would certainly have noticed the warning bleak northern sky and other indications of the coming storm. And undoubtedly, if they had started toward the camp, they were by this time being punished for their dereliction. They would make the camp, though, he was sure, for they had the wind at their backs, and they knew the

trail. He expected, any minute, to hear them at the door. He grinned, his face a trifle grim as he anticipated their astonishment at finding him there, with the two fence cutters occupying the bunks.

He had not followed the herd to the Circle L shelters because he had had small hope of keeping close to the fence cutters in the storm. And he had brought them back to the cabin to make sure of them. As he sat at the table he drew out the paper the men had signed and read their names:

"Lay Givens."

"Ben Link."

Their confession would convict Gary Warden of a crime that—if it did not open the doors of the penitentiary to him—would bring upon him the condemnation of every honest man in the state. In his anxiety to inflict damage upon Lawler, Warden had overstepped himself.

Lawler had betrayed no passion that day when he had got off the train at Willets with his men and Blondy Antrim. He had not permitted any of them to suspect that the incident of the attempted theft of a portion of the trail herd had affected him. But it had affected him. It had aroused him as he never had been aroused before; it had filled him with a passionate hatred of Gary Warden so intense that when his thoughts dwelt upon the man he felt a lust to destroy him. Not even Lafe Corwin, watching him that day at Willets, knew how he had fought to overcome the driving desire to kill Warden, Singleton, and Antrim, as they had stood there on the platform.

His eyes chilled now, as he thought of Warden and the others. He got up, his blood pulsing heavily, and started toward the fire. He had reached it, and was standing before it, when he heard a sound at the door —a faint knocking, and a voice.

Davies and Harris were coming now. They were cold, he supposed, had seen the light in the window— perhaps had tried the door; the wind drowning the noise so that he had not heard it before. They were in a hurry to get in, to the warmth the cabin afforded.

He was in no hurry to let them in, and he walked deliberately to the table and stood beside it, his back to the fire, smiling ironically.

He heard no further sound, and he supposed the men had gone to the dugout to turn their horses into its shelter before again trying the door.

He was in a grimly humorous mood, now, and he stooped, blew out the light and stepped toward the door, standing back of it, where it would swing against him when the men opened it.

He loosened the fastenings, stealthily. He wanted them to come in and find the two fence cutters there.

He stood for a long time at the door, listening, waiting. No sound reached his ears, and he scowled, puzzled. Then, above the wailing voice of the storm, came the shrill, piercing neigh of a horse.

Several times in his life had Lawler heard that sound— once when a cow-pony which had been bogged down in quicksand had neighed when he had been drawn under; and again when a horse which he had been riding had stepped into a gopher hole and had

broken a leg. He had been forced to shoot the animal, for which he had formed a sincere attachment; and it had seemed to him that when he drew the pistol the horse knew what impended—for its shrill neigh had been almost human in its terrible appeal.

It was such a sound that now reached his ears above the roar of the storm.

Davies and Harris were in trouble.

With a bound Lawler tore the door open and stood, leaning against the terrific wind, trying to peer out into the white smother that shrieked around him. When he made out the outlines of a horse not more than half a dozen feet from the open doorway—the animal so encrusted with snow that he looked like a pallid ghost—and a shapeless bundle on his back that seemingly was ready to pitch into a huge drift that had formed in front of the cabin—he leaped outward, a groan of sympathy breaking from him.

In an instant he was inside again, carrying the shapeless bundle, his lips stiff and white as he peered close at it as he tenderly laid it on the floor of the cabin.

With swift movements he lighted the lamp again, and then returning to the bundle, leaned over it, pulling away a scarf that covered its head and disclosing a white, drawn face—the face of the woman he had met, in Willets, at the foot of the stairs leading to Gary Warden's office!

Lawler wheeled swiftly, leaping to first one and then to the other of the bunks where the fence cutters lay, tearing the ropes from them.

The tall man tumbled out first, urged by what he

had seen and by the low tense voice of his captor. He seized a tin pan and dove out of the open doorway, returning instantly, the pan heaped high with snow. The other man, following the first quickly, dove through the snow drifts to the dugout where he fumbled in the slicker on Lawler's saddle until he found a flask.

By the time the little man returned the woman was in one of the lower bunks. A pair of bare feet, small and shapely, were sticking out over the edge of the bunk, and the tall fence cutter was vigorously rubbing snow upon them. A pair of small, high-top riding boots of soft, pliable leather, was lying beside the bunk near some pitiably thin stockings.

At the other end of the bunk Lawler was bathing, with ineffable tenderness and care, a face that had been swathed in the scarf he had previously removed. The long, glistening, black hair had been brushed back from its owner's forehead by Lawler; and a corner of a blanket had been modestly folded over a patch of white breast, exposed when Lawler had ruthlessly torn away the flimsy, fluffy waist.

"It was the scarf that saved her face." said Lawler, after he had worked over the unconscious form for a quarter of an hour. The face was flushed, now — which was a good sign; and the feet and ankles were beginning to show signs of restored circulation also — though more reluctantly.

"How she ever got through it I'm not pretending to say," declared Lawler, grimly. "But she did it, and the frost didn't get her, much. She'll be fresh as a daisy in a couple of hours."

The tall man — Link — had ceased his labors with the woman, and was standing near Lawler. He grinned at Lawler's words.

His face was flushed, his eyes were glowing with passion as he watched the inert form on the bunk.

"She's a peach," he said, thickly. Lawler was not looking at him; he was giving all his attention to the woman.

"Della Wharton," continued Link. "I've seen her at the Two Diamond — runnin' around with Warden. Warden's took a shine to her. Don't blame him." He muttered something else that Lawler did not hear, for Lawler was paying no attention to him.

Lawler held the flask to the woman's half-open mouth, and smiled when several drops of the strong spirits trickled over her tongue. Then he walked to the wood pile and replenished the fire. Returning, he saw Link standing close to the bunk, smiling bestially at the upturned face. When Lawler caught sight of him he was fingering the disordered hair, lifting it and letting it filter through his fingers.

Without a word, Lawler leaped and struck with bitter malignance. Not a sound escaped Link as he fell. Lawler lifted him bodily, threw him upon the pile of wood in the corner, where he lay huddled up, unconscious.

Wheeling swiftly, his eyes ablaze with the terrible passion that had seized him, Lawler faced the bunk. The woman's head was moving slowly from side to side, as though she were making an effort to lift it; her eyelids were fluttering, and her hands were stray-

ing over the bedclothing, the fingers closing and unclosing.

Lawler made a horrible grimace at Givens.

"Get out of here, damn you!" he said. "Go out and take care of her horse — anything! If you are in here when she wakes up, I'll kill you! And take that other skunk out of here, too — take him to the dugout, and don't come back here for an hour!"

He watched impatiently while Givens seized his companion and dragged him outside. Then Lawler fastened the door, and standing near it, watched the woman.

Her eyes were open. He could see them, even though he stood slightly behind her. She moved her head, lifted it and gazed around the room, seemingly bewildered at what she saw. Then she twisted her body around; saw her bare feet, and quickly drew an end of the bunk blanket over them.

And then she saw Lawler. Her eyes opened wide, filling with satisfaction, and she sat up, holding one hand to her throat, tight against the flesh, covering it with the other.

"Oh!" she said, thinly; "I — I got here, didn't I? But I didn't expect to find you here!"

CHAPTER XIX

DEATH AT A DOOR

LAWLER smiled. "Then I reckon we're both surprised, ma'am," he said. "I certainly wasn't expecting the norther to bring you. You had a mighty narrow squeeze. You were pretty near all in when I opened the door and saw you."

The girl drew a long, quavering breath and leaned back against the wall of the bunk, closing her eyes.

Her hair had fallen about her shoulders, showing the white throat through the damp, glistening folds; and when she again opened her eyes, they were big and luminous — and brown, Lawler took note of that, for the glare from the lamp was directly upon them.

Renewed life — animation — certainly beautified her. While Lawler had been working with her to restore her suspended vitality he had felt no emotion beyond an eagerness to restore her to consciousness. Now he was vibrant with sympathy, with pity, and with wonder.

Why had she come here? It was quite evident that she had come intentionally, for her words: "I got here, didn't I?" seemed to be proof of that. Also, she had not anticipated finding him at the cabin, for she had said so in as many words.

She gathered the blanket closer around her, noting that her feet were wrapped in it and that one end of it covered her throat. Lawler saw the blushes come

and go in her face as she worked with the blanket, and he secretly applauded her modesty.

When she had arranged the blanket she looked straight at him. She studied his face long before she spoke, and his eyes gleamed with satisfaction when he saw her lips form a faint, half-smile. She had decided she was not afraid of him.

She was embarrassed, but not to the point of prudishness. Her gaze was direct, frankly grateful. But there was something else in her eyes — a vague uneasiness, curiosity, repressed eagerness. She glanced swiftly around the interior of the cabin, and into the other bunks. And when she saw Lawler watching her keenly she blushed. And now, as she dropped her gaze, he saw her start as her eyes rested on the tangled ropes that Lawler had torn from the two fence cutters when he had released them after he had carried her into the cabin. The ropes were lying on the floor where he had thrown them in his haste.

"Has — has anything happened?" she asked, looking swiftly at him, blushing again.

"Plenty," he said; "you came."

"I — I mean — that is, has anything else happened?" she added. She seemed to hold her breath for his answer.

"I caught two fence cutters."

"Did they cut the fence?" She was rigid, tense.

Lawler nodded, and he saw her hands clench.

"But there wasn't any damage done. I caught them just after they cut it, and I made them repair it before the cattle got through."

"And the two men?" she questioned, breathlessly.

"They're in the dugout—with the horses. They were in here, until you came."

She leaned back, breathing fast. Her color was high, her eyes were shining with satisfaction. And while Lawler watched her she laughed quaveringly.

"Then I had that long, cold ride for nothing," she said.

Lawler looked straight at her. "You knew the fence was to be cut?"

Her color receded and she met his gaze unflinchingly, resolutely.

"Yes. I overheard Gary Warden telling two of the Two Diamond men—Link and Givens—to cut it. Warden wanted to destroy all your cattle. It seems he has had men watching them—and your men. And he learned the herd was on the level near here. He told the men to wait until a storm threatened. Gary didn't know I overheard him telling the men to cut the fence; and I said nothing to him. But I waited until I saw an opportunity, and then I came, to warn the men I expected would be here. I didn't expect to find you here; and I intended to keep silent regarding what I had heard."

"Why are you telling it, now?"

She blushed again and gazed downward. Then she looked at him with direct, puzzled eyes.

"I—I really don't know," she said, hesitatingly. "I expect it was because I felt guilty—or because I thought I saw something in your eyes that made me think you knew that I hadn't ridden over here for the

fun of it. It was a very cold and disagreeable ride.

"And, somehow, I—I think you ought to know it. When I overheard Gary telling those men to cut the fence it seemed to me that it was the meanest scheme I ever had heard of. I was so angry I could have horse-whipped Gary. At the time I believe I wasn't thinking of you at all—I just kept seeing those poor cows wandering away in the storm, to freeze to death in the open. And I determined to ride over here and prevent it. I suppose what I have told you will make trouble for Gary. I suppose I shouldn't have told you."

"Givens and Link told me."

"Oh! You made them tell, of course—*you* would do that. What are you going to do about it?"

"What would you do—Miss—" Lawler paused.

"I am Della Wharton," smiled the girl.

"Well, what would *you* do, Miss Wharton?"

The girl flashed a quick glance at him. "Considering that the plan didn't succeed, and that I rode clear over here to tell you about it—don't you think you ought to keep silent, Mr. Lawler?"

Whatever Lawler intended to do later, he was silent now. He was puzzled, amazed, over the startling frankness the girl had exhibited. He had heard, from Blackburn—or somebody—it wasn't important whom—that this girl was staying at the Two Diamond. He believed Blackburn had hinted at relations more intimate. And she was at this moment betraying Warden—delivering him into the hands of a man the latter hated.

"Miss Wharton," said Lawler gravely; "I confess I am puzzled. You accept Warden's hospitality, and yet you come here to betray him."

She laughed. "I am not accepting Gary's hospitality. My father is a member of the company that bought the Two Diamond, and I have as much right to be there as Gary has. We live East—in New York. I came West out of curiosity. I wanted to see the ranch. And now that I am here I intend to stay. I have always been eager to live in the West."

"Then you don't like Gary Warden?"

The girl's face sobered. "I like him. That is all."

Lawler's eyes were still grave. "Miss Wharton," he said slowly; "do you know what Gary Warden is doing—what the company with which your father is connected, is doing?"

"Yes," said the girl, frankly; "they—all of them—are trying to control the western cattle market." She looked straight at him, with no sign of embarrassment.

"That is business, isn't it? It is what men are beginning to call 'big business.' It means centralization of power, resources—and a number of things that go with it. It is an admirable scheme—don't you think? It eliminates uncertainty, risk of loss. It means the stabilizing of the cattle industry; it means gigantic profits to the men who have brains big enough to control it."

Lawler smiled. "Also, Miss Wharton, it means the complete subjection of the cattle raiser. It means that

competition will be stifled; that the cattle owner will be compelled to take what prices the buyers offer. It means that the incentive to raise cattle will be destroyed. It means the end of the open market—which has always been a spur to industry. It is evil."

The girl laughed. "How tragic!" she mocked. "One would think we were facing a cataclysm, whereas business men are merely just beginning to take advantage of some of the opportunities that are everywhere around them. It is all perfectly legal, isn't it? I have heard my father say that it is."

Lawler's smile grew slightly bitter. He saw that the girl's mind was merely skipping over the surface of the commercial sea upon which her father sailed a pirate craft; she had not plunged into the depths where she might have found the basic principles of all business—fairness; she had taken no account of the human impulse that, in just men, impels them to grant to their fellows a fighting chance to win.

Watching her closely, Lawler saw in her the signs of frivolity and vanity that he had failed to see that day when he had met her in Willets. Her attitude now revealed her as plainly as though he had known her all her days. She comprehended none of life's big problems; the relations of men to one another had not compelled her attention; the fine, deep impulses of sympathy had not touched her. She was selfish, self-centered, light, inconsequential—a woman who danced from under the burdens of life and laughed at those who were forced to bear them for her.

And yet she was a woman, demanding respect from

his sex. He smiled as he turned from her to fix the fire, wondering at the courage that had driven her to ride to the cabin in the storm. His smile broadened when he remembered she had said she sympathized with the "cows"—that motive, while not a high one, was as good as another since the pursuing of it had meant good for him in the end.

"Do *you* like this country?" she asked, as he turned.

"It isn't a half bad place. If it wasn't for some persons—and northers——"

She laughed. "There are bad people everywhere. As for the 'norther'—I enjoyed it very much until—until it got so bad that I just couldn't see where I was going. I began to be afraid that I was lost and that I'd freeze to death. And then I saw the light in the window—a little square that flickered feebly in the distance, and which sometimes seemed to disappear completely." She smiled, tremulously.

"It seemed that—after I got here—I was to freeze to death, anyway. For I couldn't make you hear me. I rode close to the door and pounded on it. I was afraid to get off, for fear I would fall in that big drift near the door and not be able to get up again. I was so cold and stiff——"

She hesitated, and Lawler saw tears in her eyes.

It was the reaction, delayed by their talk. Self-accusation shone in Lawler's eyes as he started toward her.

"I'm a box-head, Miss Wharton, for standing here, talking about nothing at all, and you nearly freezing to death."

And then he halted, midway of the distance toward her, aware that he could do nothing when he did reach her. And her manner warned him of that, too, for she pulled the blanket closer around her and crowded as far back into the bunk as she could get, looking at him with embarrassed eyes.

"If you could get your clothes fixed," he began. "You see, Miss Wharton, there wasn't much time, and we had to get them off mighty rapid. You can see that we were none too gentle about it."

She blushed, and he abruptly turned his back and walked to the fireplace. He stuck close to it until he heard her say:

"Won't you please hang my stockings up somewhere? They are so wet I can't get them on."

The stockings, wet and limp, fell close beside him. He snatched them up, grinning widely, though fearful that she might see the grin, and carefully laid them over the back of a chair, pulling the chair close to the fire.

Then he got out a frying-pan and began to prepare supper for her. When the aroma of the sizzling bacon was wafted to her, he heard her exclaim:

"U-um, that smells good! Why, I am almost famished!"

Five minutes later, with a plate in her lap and a cup of steaming coffee resting on the rail of the bunk, she was eating. Her eyes were bright and her color high as she watched Lawler, who was seated at the table with his back to her.

"You don't feel much like talking, do you?"

"No," he said. "According to the way this norther is whooping it up we'll run out of talk before we can break trail out of here."

"Do you mean that the storm may last some days?"

"There is no telling. At this time of the year they are mighty uncertain. I've known them to stick around for a month or more."

She sat very silent, and for a time did not even move her lips. Stealing a swift glance at her, expecting to see a worried light in her eyes, Lawler noted that there was a slight—a very slight smile on her lips.

He was amazed, incredulous, and he stole another glance at her to make certain. There was no denying it—there was a smile in the eyes that were gazing meditatively past him into the fire; a smile on her lips—giving him proof that the prospect of remaining alone in the cabin with him had not crushed her—had not brought the hysterical protests that he had feared. She was plainly pleased, possibly considering the thing an adventure which would have no damaging consequences.

With a malice in his eyes that she did not see—for he looked gravely at her, he said, slowly:

"Listen, Miss Wharton!"

He raised a hand and looked at the north window. Following his gaze she saw the snow whipping against the glass, rattling against the panes like small hailstones hurled with frightful velocity. The incessant droning whine of the wind reached their ears, deep in volume as though it would tell them of its interrupted sweep across the vast plains; as though to convince

them of its unlimited power and ferocity. She knew as well as he that the big drifts around the cabin had grown bigger; that other drifts were forming around the walls. For the sounds were muffled, and a great, weird calm had settled inside the cabin. The walls, snow-banked, were deadening outside sound.

"A man couldn't go half a mile in that, now, Miss Wharton. And it will be days before anybody can reach us. I am afraid we are in for a long spell of monotony."

"Well," she said, gazing straight at him; a glow in her eyes that puzzled him; "we can't help it, can we? And I suppose we shall have to make the best of it."

Lawler, however, did not expect the storm to last more than a day or so. They seldom did, at this time of the year. He had drawn the gloomy picture merely in an attempt to force Miss Wharton to realize the indelicacy of her position. He had thought she would have exhibited perturbation. Instead, she was calm and plainly unworried.

Puzzled, Lawler leaned an elbow on the table and scowled into the fire. There was no apparent reason why he should object to remaining in the cabin with a pretty woman who did not seem eager to leave it. And yet he was afflicted with a grave unrest.

Givens and Link were in the dugout, and presently they would return to the cabin. They would have to remain in the cabin, for it would be inhuman of him to compel them to stay very long in the dugout with the horses. Thus was Miss Wharton shielded against the

impropriety of staying for any length of time in the cabin with him, alone.

But the safeguard of propriety was also a danger. Because Link had permitted a certain light to glow in his eyes Lawler had knocked him down. If the four of them were to remain in the cabin for any length of time, there would be periods when he must sleep. And then Link——

Lawler's thoughts broke off here, for he heard a sound at the door — Givens' voice, saying hoarsely:

"For God's sake, Boss, let us in! We're freezin' to death!"

Lawler got up and walked to the door. He hesitated as he lifted the bar, telling Miss Wharton to wrap the blanket tightly around her in anticipation of the rush of wind. When he saw that she obeyed him, he swung the door open.

As Lawler opened the door he stepped back with it, escaping by inches the sweep of an axe blade that caught the light from the lamp and shimmered brightly in a half-circle as it was swung with the malignant force of Link's arms.

The blade of the axe struck the floor, sinking deep into the boards; while Link, hurled off balance by the viciousness of his attack, tumbled headlong after the axe, sprawling on his hands and knees on the cabin floor, muttering curses.

CHAPTER XX

THE "KILLING"

FOR an instant following the attack there was no change in the scene inside the cabin. Surprise that Lawler had escaped his blow seemed to retard Link's movements quite as much as the force of his fall. For he floundered on the floor, unable to get his feet under him; while the bitter wind, howling in through the open door, hurled a blinding avalanche of white clear to the fireplace. On the floor in the smother of white was Link, and near him the handle of the axe stuck rigidly upward, its blade buried deeply in the floor.

Della Wharton had been watching Lawler as he opened the door, and she had seen what quickly had followed. Now, though a nameless terror had seized her, she still watched, unable to withdraw her gaze, powerless to move or to open her lips.

She saw Lawler standing where he had halted when he had opened the door — one hand grasping the bar that he had lifted when he had drawn the door back; the other hanging at his side. She saw him dimly through the driving mist that was between them, but he loomed big, gigantic, as he stood there, motionless in the instant following the attack, watching Link.

Then the scene changed swiftly. Link was still on the floor when Givens leaped into the cabin. He held

a heavy piece of cordwood in one hand, and as he entered the door he paused for an instant, plainly blinded by the light and the snow. His face was hideous with passion.

Until now, the lamp had been fluttering in the rush of wind. As Givens stood, trying to peer around him, the light spluttered and went out, plunging the cabin into a darkness but little relieved by the dull, red flames in the fireplace.

It was still light enough for the girl to see, however; and she gasped as she watched Link scramble to his feet and lunge toward the axe. Then the semi-darkness was rent by a flame streak that started from where Lawler stood, and the air of the cabin rocked with a deafening roar. She saw Link go down in a heap, and before she could draw a breath another lancelike flame darted from the point where Lawler stood. She saw Givens stagger; heard the heavy piece of cordwood thud to the floor; saw Givens plunge backward through the door to land in the big drift outside.

Then she huddled down into the bunk, covering her face with her hands, shuddering, cringing from the horror she had witnessed.

When she again opened her eyes the lamp had been lighted and the door closed. For a long time she did not move, dreading to peer from the bunk, lest she see a thing that would remind her of the tragedy.

But when, after a while, she found courage to look, she saw Lawler standing near the fireplace, looking down into the flames, his back to her.

The axe, she noted, shuddering, was standing on the

floor near the woodpile; and there was no sign of Link or Givens.

For a long time she was silent, watching Lawler, a dread wonder filling her. And at last, when the continuing silence began to affect her with its horrible monotony, she said, quaveringly:

"Did — you — Are they *dead?*"

"Yes," said Lawler, gruffly; "I took them out back of the windbreak." He wheeled, to look straight at her, his gaze level and somber.

"I had to do it — there was no other way. I'm sorry you had to see it."

That was all. He did not speak to her again. For a long time she watchèd him, but he did not change position — standing there, tall, big, seeming to brood into the dancing flames that cast grotesque figures over the walls of the cabin.

CHAPTER XXI

CHANCE — AND A MAN

DELLA must have slept, for when she again opened her eyes the light had been extinguished and a gray glow was coming through the north window.

Morning had come. She gathered the bedclothes around her and sat up, glancing around the cabin for Lawler. He must have gone out, for the heavy wooden bar had been removed from the door — it was standing in a corner. She suspected Lawler had gone out to care for the horses, and she hurriedly got out of the bunk, ran to the door and barred it, and began to dress.

A fire roared in the fireplace, and it was warm in the cabin. But she noted, with an interest that was almost calm, that the storm still raged as furiously as the night before. There was this difference. Last night the wind had been driven against the cabin in fitful blasts, for the most part; now to her ears there came a ceaseless, droning hum with no intervals of silence between — a steady, vicious, incessant rushing roar that made her fear the cabin walls could not long resist it.

When she thought of last night's tragedy it seemed almost remote to her — a thing that had happened long ago; an incident that time had robbed of its gruesomeness.

For she saw, now, that it had been inevitable—that Lawler had acted in self-defense. There had been no other way. She shuddered when she thought of the ghastly things that were lying under the windbreak; but her own comfort became instantly paramount, and she drew a chair close to the fire and enjoyed its welcome warmth while dressing.

After dressing she got up from the chair and walked over to the chuck-box, smiling as she noted the bulging sides; her eyes glowing with satisfaction when she lifted the lid and saw the well-filled interior. She paused before the shelf upon which reposed a supply of canned foods; and exclaimed with delight when she saw, affixed to the wall near the door, a piece of broken mirror. She spent some time looking into the glass, combing her hair with a fragment of comb she found on a shelf beside the mirror.

She had finished when she heard a knock on the door. She removed the bar, and when Lawler stepped in, closing the door instantly to keep out the rush of wind, she was standing in a corner, smiling demurely at him.

His face was grave, and he did not respond to her mood as he stood there, watching her.

"Well," she said, after a silence, during which his face did not change expression; "can't you say something complimentary?" She lifted her eyes challengingly, as though to invite his inspection.

He saw that the tragedy had not affected her as it would have affected some women—his mother and Ruth Hamlin, for example—though he veiled the reproof in his eyes with a smile. The vanity she

exhibited, her self-interest, egotism disgusted him.

"You've found the mirror," he said. "Well, you look pretty well slicked up. What happened last night seems to have affected you very little."

"Why should it?" she demanded, defiantly. "I don't intend to brood over two men that I did not know —two men who attempted to commit murder! Of course, it was an awful shock, and all that, but I am not going into hysterics over it. Besides, I didn't kill them."

Lawler abruptly turned away from her and walked to the fireplace. His face was pale and his eyes were glowing with contempt. She followed him as far as the table, her lips in a pout—and stood there watching him, her gaze mocking, defiant.

He finally turned and looked at her, his lips set in straight lines.

"Yes, I killed them, Miss Wharton," he said, evenly. "Do you know why?"

"Because they seemed determined to kill you—because they attacked you, I suppose," she returned.

"You are wrong, Miss Wharton. There was nothing personal in that killing. Those men were carrying out a principle of the unscrupulous system you defended in our talk last night. If there had been no system those men would not have attempted to cut my fence, I would not have captured them, and they would not have attempted to kill me. Do you see what I meant last night when I said the system was evil?"

She held his gaze unflinchingly. "Mr. Lawler," she said; "those men had no orders to kill you—they

attempted that because you captured them, I suppose. And I did not, last night, attempt to defend Gary Warden's action in sending them here. In fact—if you remember—I came over here purposely to defeat them."

"But if there was no scheme to control cattle there would have been no incentive to cut my fence," he said, impatiently.

"Perhaps some other persons would have cut it," she answered; "criminals are everywhere. Please don't preach to me, Mr. Lawler," she added, pleadingly. "I—I think you ought to be glad that I came—aren't you?"

He smiled grimly. "Well, I am not going to turn you out into the storm."

Getting out some cooking utensils he began to prepare breakfast. She watched him for an instant, and then went to the north window, rubbed a hole through the frost and tried to look out. She could not see more than a few inches into the white blur that roared against the glass, and so she turned, sought a chair near the table, and resumed watching Lawler. And her eyes filled with a warm light as they followed his movements—noting that he seemed handsomer now than he had appeared when she had met him that day at the foot of the stairs. And she smiled at his back, exulting in the continued fury of the storm. For it meant that she would be alone with him for days—many, perhaps. And she told herself that she loved Lawler; that she had loved him since the day she had encountered him at the foot of the stairs leading to

Warden's office. He was wealthy, handsome; and in her code of morals it was no crime to take advantage of every opportunity that chance presented. And chance——

Here Gary Warden's face flashed in her mental vision. And she smiled. For Warden had never thrilled her as this man had thrilled her. Warden was cold, coarse, gross. This man was vibrant with life, with energy—there was fire in him. And it had been Warden's scheming that had sent her to Lawler. She laughed and snuggled contentedly down in the chair.

CHAPTER XXII

THE WHITE WASTE

WARDEN and Singleton had been in Willets on the day the storm broke. They had ridden into town early, and when they saw the low-flying clouds sweeping down from the north Singleton grinned maliciously, with a significance that Warden could not mistake.

"Warden, it's goin' to storm," he said.

Warden glanced at the other, understandingly.

"Looks a whole lot like it, Singleton. And we can be more comfortable at the Two Diamond than in town."

"Right," grinned Singleton. "An' we'd better hit the breeze right now, for she's comin' fast."

As they mounted their horses in front of the building that contained Warden's office, the latter looked sharply at Singleton.

"Givens and Link ought to be busy by now. You say your men reported that the Circle L men stocked Number One line camp yesterday?"

"She's stocked!" laughed Singleton; "Tulerosa an' Denver brought word. An' the herd was on the big level north of the camp. They'll head straight for that break because they'll hit it before they hit the basin. An' Givens an' Link will send 'em through, to hell—an' then some. An' them damn fools, Davies

an' Harris, is layin' in the back room of the Wolf, paralyzed by that forty-rod that Big Jim Lafflin has been slippin' over the bar to 'em. They won't know they're alive until this time tomorrow, an' then they'll be so scared that they'll just keep right on hittin' the forty-rod for fair! I reckon we've got Lawler goin', now, the damn maverick!"

Warden and Singleton rode fast, but the storm caught them. Midway on the ten-mile stretch of plain between Willets and the Two Diamond they turned their backs to the white smother and sent their horses racing headlong away from the storm.

"She's a humdinger!" yelled Singleton to Warden as the wind shrieked and howled about them. "If Givens an' Link git them cattle started they'll drift clear into Mexico. Three thousand! I reckon that'll set the damn fool back some!"

The two men had only five miles to ride when the storm struck, and Singleton was experienced. And yet when they rode into the Two Diamond stable and dismounted, both men were breathless and tired; their legs and arms stiff with cold and their faces raw and blue from the bitter wind that had swirled around them.

"Another five miles of that an' we wouldn't be as active as we are now!" said Singleton, grimly. "She's got a worse bite than any wind I ever seen!"

Warden's hands were so cold he could not remove the saddle from his horse. A Two Diamond man performed that service for him, and for Singleton. While Warden and Singleton were stamping their feet in an

effort to restore circulation, the Two Diamond man called to them from the far end of the stable:

"You run into Miss Della?"

Warden wheeled toward the man. "What do you mean, Lefty? What about Miss Della? Isn't she at the ranchhouse?"

"She rode away about three hours ago — on that big roan of hers. Went to town, most likely. She didn't say. I reckoned that if she *had* gone to town, you'd have run into her."

Warden ran stiffly to the ranchhouse, where he came upon Aunt Hannah in the kitchen.

"Where's Della?" he demanded, excitedly.

The woman looked at Warden in mild surprise.

"Why, didn't she come with you, Mr. Warden? She told me she intended to." And then her face blanched at the wild excitement Warden betrayed.

"She isn't with you — you didn't meet her? Oh, she'll be frozen to death in this terrible storm!"

"Damn you!" cursed Warden, gripping the woman's arm until she cried out in pain; "didn't I tell you not to let her go alone — anywhere?"

He released the woman and plunged out, running blindly back to the stable. He collided with Singleton at the stable door. His face was ghastly, his eyes bulging.

"Della's gone, Singleton!" he gasped. "She went to town. For God's sake, get those saddles on again! We've got to go back!"

"Warden, it can't be done," said Singleton in a low voice; "you'd freeze to death before you went a mile.

There ain't any man can face that storm an' live. Man," he added when Warden made a violent gesture of impatience; "use your reason. We've just come five miles, with the wind at our backs — an' we're half froze. Lefty just told me that Miss Della left about three hours ago. If that's the case she's likely in town, snug an' warm, somewheres. We'd ought to have nosed around a little before we left, but we didn't, an' mebbe she rode right by your place, thinkin' to stop in on the way back. You left early, you know. Anyway, Warden, if she's in town she'll stay there till the storm is over — snug an' warm. And if she didn't go to town there wouldn't be no use lookin' for her. Why, man, look out there! you can't see your hand before you!"

Warden raged insanely, stalking back and forth through the stable; and finally to the ranchhouse again, where he bitterly arraigned Aunt Hannah. But in the end he stayed in the ranchhouse, close beside a window, out of which he watched until the night came to shut off his view of the great, white world.

Over at the Circle L ranchhouse were other anxious watchers — men whose steady eyes held a haunting gleam of worry, and whose rugged faces grew grim and long as the days passed and the storm did not abate. From their bunkhouse they watched, day and night, for the end; their horses ready, heavy clothing at hand for a plunge into the white waste that stretched on all sides of them. Had they known which way Lawler had gone when he left the Circle L they would have searched for him despite the frigid danger that gripped

the world. But Lawler had gone, leaving no word; and there was nothing the men could do.

Through a window in the Circle L ranchhouse anxious eyes peered also — those of a gray-haired woman with a kindly, gentle face into which, as the long days passed, came lines that had not been there before. And yet in the watching eyes was a gleam of hope — of calm confidence in the big son who was somewhere in the white waste — a conviction that he was safe, that he would survive and return to her.

CHAPTER XXIII

A WOMAN'S WILES

FROM the ceiling of the cabin Lawler had suspended a spare blanket. It hung between the two tiers of bunks, thus providing a certain privacy for both Miss Wharton and Lawler.

Lawler had been scrupulously considerate, and with a delicacy that must have earned her applause — had she been serious-minded — he had sought to seem unaware or indifferent to the many inevitable intimacies forced upon them by the nature of their association.

He knew, however, that the girl was secretly laughing at him. Certain signs were convincing. On the first night of their enforced joint occupancy of the cabin, she had silently watched him tack the blanket to the ceiling; and though she had said nothing, he had noted a gleam in her eyes which had made him wonder if he should not have waited until *she* suggested it.

At other times he felt her gaze upon him — her eyes always glowing with the suggestion of silent mirth. She seemed to be amused over the delicacy he exhibited — to be wondering at it. Whether she appreciated it or not he did not know, or care. For he had noted other things that had increased his contempt of her. She was betraying absolutely no perturbation over her enforced stay in the cabin with him. On the contrary,

her manner gave him the impression that she was enjoying herself and not thinking of the future. She was contented with the present.

Moreover, he could not fail to be aware of her interest in him; for the many signs were infallible. Glances, the intonations of her voice, a way she had of standing close to him, of touching his hands or his shoulders — all was evidence of the guile he had detected in her, convincing him that she thought him desirable, and that she had decided to win him.

But vanity in Lawler had long since been ruthlessly overwhelmed by the serious business of life. He had never had time — in his later years — to yield to the fatuous imaginings of youth. He had lived a rough, hard life, in which values were computed by the rule of sheer worth — a life that had taught him that performance, and not appearances, must be the standard by which all men and women must ultimately be judged.

Lawler was not flattered by Della Wharton's feminine blandishments. He was grimly amused — when he was not disgusted; though he continued to treat her with the utmost courtesy and gentleness, trying to keep her from divining his emotions.

Also, he had tried to lessen the dread monotony that encompassed them. There was nothing they could do. Beyond the mechanical tasks of eating, or of cooking and sleeping, of plunging outside to the water hole for water, or of caring for the horses and bringing wood for the fire, there was no diversion except that of talking. And, as the days dragged and the storm did not abate, even talking began to irk Lawler. There would

be periods during which they would be silent, listening to the howling and moaning of the wind — hours at a stretch when the cold outside would seem to threaten, to tighten its constricting circle, when a great awe oppressed them; when it seemed that the whole world was snowbound, and that it would keep piling over and around them and all life would be extinct.

It was on the morning of the tenth day that Lawler began to notice that the dread monotony and the white, ever-present menace were beginning to affect the girl. Her face was white and in her eyes was a haunting gleam of fear. He noted how she clasped her hands; how she nervously twined and untwined her fingers, and how she kept pushing her chair toward him, as though for protection.

A swift sympathy seized him; he laughed, lowly, reaching out a hand and laying it lightly on her shoulder as she started at the sound of his voice and drew a quick, startled breath.

"Oh!" she said; "will it never end?"

"It can't last much longer, Miss Wharton," he smiled. "It has held on longer, now, than it should at this season."

The sound of his voice reassured her — it was calm, quiet, confident. Some color came back into her face, and she smiled.

"I believe I was beginning to get the doldrums," she said.

"That wouldn't be startling, Miss Wharton. Life in a line camp does become monotonous. It is to be expected. It becomes tragic. Also, it has a humorous

side — viewed from a distance — chiefly afterward. In the fall, men go into line camps fast friends. We always pair them that way. Any other method would be fatal, for when the men come out in the spring they invariably are deadly enemies. You can imagine what would happen if we sent into a line cabin two men who did not think well of each other."

She shuddered and snuggled closer to him, letting her head fall to his shoulder. A pulse of pity stirred him, and he permitted her head to stay where she had laid it, while he gently smoothed her hair.

He would have done as much for any woman in her position; the emotion that filled him was entirely that of pity. She was vain and frivolous — employing every artifice, but she was a woman despite that, and entitled, in the present circumstances, to what comfort and sympathy he could give her.

However, to Della, the moment of victory was at hand. She *had* been a trifle worried just an instant before; and the white world outside *had* seemed to threaten to rush in and crush out her life — the life she loved so well — and she had been just a little afraid.

But she had not been too frightened to note Lawler's sympathy — the quick glow in his eyes, and the atmosphere of tenderness that suddenly seemed to envelop him. It was surrender, she thought, the breaking down of that quiet, steady reserve in him which had filled her with resentment.

She caught his free hand and held it tightly, while she turned her head so that she could look into his eyes.

"Lawler," she said then, in a low voice; "I lied to you."

"Lied?" He stiffened, dropped his hand from her head and looked straight at her.

She laughed, lightly. "Yes; I lied, Lawler. The day we met in Willets—you remember? Well, I loved you from that moment, Lawler. You looked so big and fine and strong. I just couldn't help it. I did overhear Gary Warden telling those two men to cut the fence; and I didn't want them to set all those cattle adrift. But I didn't intend to come here. I started out to find your ranch—the Circle L. I thought I would find you there, and I knew I wouldn't be able to go back to the Two Diamond right away—that you would have to keep me at your house until the storm was over. But I got lost, and when I saw the light in the window, here, I knew I had better go toward it. But I came because I wanted to be near you, Lawler. And now—" She laughed and tried to draw him toward her.

"Of course you are not in earnest, Miss Wharton," he said, slowly, his voice grave. "Such a confession——"

"It's the truth," she declared, shamelessly, holding tightly to him. "It is simple, isn't it? I love you—and I came to you. I came, because I had to—I wanted to. I had been thinking of you—dreaming of you. You were in my mind all the time.

"And you have been acting dreadfully distant. I had begun to believe that you didn't like me—that you wished I hadn't come——"

"That would be the truth, Miss Wharton," he interrupted. He grimly walked to the fireplace, standing with his back to it, looking at her. He was wondering how he could tell her that she had disgraced her sex; how he could, without being brutal, tell her how he abhorred women who pursued men.

Despite the impulse of charity that moved him, he could not veil the grim disgust that had seized him. It showed in the curve of his lips and in his eyes.

And Miss Wharton saw it. She had been watching him narrowly when he walked away from her; she was looking at him now, in resentful inquiry, her lips tight-pressed. She was puzzled, incredulous.

Then, with their glances locked, she laughed, jeeringly.

"I really don't know how to classify you!" she said, scornfully. "Am I ugly?"

He smiled grimly. "Far from it," he answered, frankly. "I think," he added, his gaze still holding hers, "that mere physical beauty doesn't intrigue my interest. There must be something back of it."

"Character, I suppose," she mocked; "nobility, virtue?"

"I think you have said it," he smiled. "At least I haven't the slightest desire to like you."

"School teachers are more in your line, I suppose," she jibed.

There was a wanton light in her eyes. The change that had come over her was startling; and Lawler found himself watching her, trying to associate this new side of her character with that she had shown

before she had betrayed her real character; she represented a type that had always been repulsive to him. And, until now, she had fooled him. He had wasted his politeness, his gentleness, his consideration, and his delicacy. He understood, now, why she had seemed to laugh at him when he had endeavored to provide a certain measure of privacy for her; he knew how she felt at this moment, when she must realize that she had betrayed herself.

Any further talk between them would be profitless, and so Lawler did not answer her question. He stood, looking at the north window, which was a little to one side of her; while she sat staring past him, her lips straight and hard.

At last she looked up. "What an odd courtship!"

His gaze dropped, met hers, and he smiled.

"Yes — odd," he returned, dryly.

"But I suppose," she said, in a tone equally dry; "that you will make up for it, after we are married. You will learn to like me."

"Yes; after we are married," he smiled, ironically.

"That will be as soon as we can get to town, I presume," she went on, watching him with brazen directness. "You see," she explained; "I have been here with you for about two weeks, you know, and my friends will ask embarrassing questions. You are so *honorable* that you cannot refuse to protect my reputation."

"I am sorry, of course, Miss Wharton. But you should have considered your reputation before you decided to come here."

"You mean that you won't marry me?" she demanded. She got up and walked toward him, halting within a pace of him and standing stiffly before him.

"You have perception, after all, it seems," he said, gravely. "But you don't understand human nature. No man — or woman — in this section will see anything wrong in your staying in this cabin with me during the storm. They will accept it as being the most natural thing in the world. It was a simple act of humanness for me to take you in, and it entails no offer of marriage. Perhaps it has been done, and will be done again, where there is an inclination to marry. It has been done in books, and in certain sections of the world where narrow-minded people are the manufacturers of public sentiment. The mere fact that I happened to save your life does not obligate me to marry you, Miss Wharton. And I do not feel like playing the martyr."

For an instant it seemed that Della would become hysterical. But when she looked into Lawler's eyes and realized that mere acting would not deceive him, she sneered.

"I might have known *you* wouldn't be man enough to protect me!"

Lawler smiled, but did not answer. And after an instant, during which Della surveyed him with scorn unspeakable, she strode stiffly to a chair in a far corner of the room and dropped into it.

Lawler had been little affected. He pitied her because of her perverted moral sense, which sought an honorable marriage from a wild, immoral impulse.

He pitied her because she was what she was—a wanton who was determined by scheme and wile to gain her ends. And he shrewdly suspected that she was not so much concerned for her reputation as she was eager to achieve what she had determined upon. Defeat to her kind is intolerable.

"Gary Warden will never marry me if he discovers that I have been here," declared Della from the corner.

"You said you did not love Warden, Miss Wharton," Lawler reminded her. "You wouldn't marry a man you merely liked, would you?"

"We have been engaged for a year. Certainly, I shall marry him. Why not? But he won't have me, now!"

"Does Warden love you, Miss Wharton?"

"That doesn't concern you!" she snapped.

"No—not in the least. But if Warden loves you, and I went to him and explained that your being here was accidental——"

"Bah!" she sneered; "you're a fool, Lawler! Do you expect Gary Warden would swallow *that!* You don't know him!"

"Well," said Lawler, gently; "he need not know. If you are afraid to face public opinion, to show by your actions that you have nothing to be ashamed of, I'll take you to the Circle L, just as soon as we can get through. We'll time ourselves to get there at night. No one need know, and you can tell Warden that you were caught in the storm and drifted to the Circle L, where you stayed with my mother. I can come back here and no one will ever know the difference."

"I don't want to see your mother!" she sneered. "I'd be afraid she would be something like you! Ugh! I hate you!"

"There is only one other way," smiled Lawler. "I know Keller, the owner of the Willets Hotel, very intimately. I can take you there, at night—after the storm breaks. No one need know. You can say you were at the hotel all the time. And Keller will support your word."

"I presume I shall have to go to Willets—since I have to lie!" she said, wrathfully.

"Yes," said Lawler incisively; "it takes courage to be truthful, Miss Wharton. But if a person always tells the truth——"

"Shut up!" she said savagely; "you make me sick!" She glared malignantly at him. "Ugh, I positively loathe you! I must have been crazy when I thought I saw something in you!" She paused for an instant to get her breath, and then she resumed, vindictively:

"I hope they arrest you for killing those two men—Link and Givens. I hope they hang you. And they will hang you, because you can't prove you acted in self-defense. You'll be sorry you didn't marry me when you realize that I might have saved you by telling the truth about the fight!"

"Well," he said; "you can't testify without admitting you were here, you know."

"And I will never tell!" she declared; "I will never admit it!" she added, exultingly. "You'll change your mind about marrying me—you'll have to, to save your neck!"

Lawler shook his head negatively.

"You wouldn't marry me to save your life?" asked the girl, incredulously.

"Not to save my life, Miss Wharton."

"Well," she said slowly; "you're a damned fool!"

Lawler smiled and turned away. He heard Della moving about in the cabin, but he did not look around.

But later, after there had been a deep silence for a time, he ventured a backward glance. During the day he had kept the dividing blanket rolled up out of the way, fastening it with two loops that he had suspended from the ceiling. The blanket was now down — it was the first time Della had touched it.

Lawler smiled, pulled a chair over near the fireplace, rolled a cigarette, and puffed slowly at it, reflecting that life in the cabin would now be more monotonous than ever.

Della did not get out of her bunk during the day. She ate nothing, nor did she reply to Lawler when he invited her to partake of the food he had prepared.

Late that afternoon Lawler noted a glow of light coming through the north window. He went to the door, opened it and looked out. The snow had ceased and the wind had gone down. Far over in the west a cold sun, hanging its rim on a mountain peak, bathed the world with a shimmering, glittering, blinding light.

Lawler went outside and shielding his eyes with his hands, peered out over the gleaming waste. He noted that the snow had drifted much, but that there were ridges where no snow had settled, as well as vast sections of plain where the wind had swept the snow clear.

There would be no difficulty in reaching Willets, for the wind that was coming over the plains now was mild — almost warm.

He went inside, told Della, and began to make preparations for the ride. And later that night, moving swiftly northward, under straggling clouds that obscured the moon, the two journeyed — Della swathed in clothing that assured her of warmth, and still preserving a sullen silence; Lawler riding ahead, breaking trail.

CHAPTER XXIV

DELLA'S HANDKERCHIEF

DAWN was just breaking when Lawler dropped from Red King at the windbreak near the line cabin. He put the big horse in the dugout, closed the dugout door and entered the cabin. Then he breathed a sigh of relief.

There were still some glowing embers in the fireplace, and he soon had a roaring fire, in front of which he stood for a while, meditating.

He had got Della Wharton into the Willets Hotel without, he felt certain, attracting attention. For when they had ridden into town — taking the back way in order to avoid any sleepless citizens that might be about — it was past midnight. Lawler had timed himself to reach town at about that hour, knowing that with the exception of a brothel or two, Willets would be dark.

He had been fortunate. At his first knock on the rear door of the hotel, Keller had appeared; and Keller had instantly grasped the situation — though he plainly told Della that she was "goin' to a whole lot of unnecessary trouble." "Why, good Lord, ma'am, I reckon you had a right to hole up with Lawler! Nobody'd be blamin' you. They's a dozen men in this town that would make a colander out of anybody that'd hint things about a deal like that. Lawsy, ma'am, folks

has got sense, ain't they? But if you doubt 'em, I reckon we can take care of you."

Lawler prepared and ate breakfast. It had been a tiresome ride, and after eating, knowing that there was no occasion for haste in his return to the Circle L — except that his mother would wonder over his whereabouts — he stretched out in one of the lower bunks — the one he had occupied during Della's stay in the cabin.

He had not barred the door; and when, some hours later he awoke, he saw half a dozen men in the cabin. They were standing near the door, watching him. Foremost among them was Gary Warden.

Lawler swung around in the bunk and sat on its edge, facing the men. They were Two Diamond men, for he recognized some of them.

Lawler got to his feet. He saw no friendliness in the faces of the men; and Warden was pale, scowling.

But Lawler smiled. "Looking for something, boys?" he said.

"We're looking for two men and a woman, Lawler. Have you seen anything of them?"

"I've seen two men, Warden; but no woman."

Warden's eyes quickened. Some color surged into his face.

"How long have you been here, Lawler?"

"Since the day the storm broke. Davies and Harris went to town for a spree, and I've been substituting for them."

He felt a savage amusement over Warden's attempt to conceal his disappointment. He could see that the

man was consumed with curiosity over the outcome of the fence cutting, though he dared not voice it.

"Lawler," said Warden; "we've lost two men — Link and Givens; and Della Wharton — who was staying at the Two Diamond."

"I've seen no woman, Warden. But I've seen Link and Givens. You'll find them out by the windbreak. I had to kill them."

Lawler saw the men behind Warden grow rigid; Warden's face grew ghastly.

Lawler's smile had gone. He was coldly alert, watching the men behind Lawler, aware that his news was a shock to them; divining they would not hesitate to do violence if an explanation was not quickly offered.

But there was cold malice in Lawler's heart toward Warden; and he stood, silent, watchful, until Warden recovered from his astonishment. He was determined to compel Warden to ask the question that, plainly, was in his mind.

And at last Warden asked it:

"What did you kill them for?"

"I caught them cutting my fence, Warden. At just about the time the storm struck. I brought them here — after lifting their guns. I intended to take them to Sheriff Moreton, at Willets. But during the night I sent them out for wood, and when they re-entered the cabin they attacked me — Link with an axe, and Givens with a piece of cordwood. You can see where the axe landed — where it stuck in the floor, when Link missed me as I opened the door for him."

The door opened and the men filed out, eager to as-

certain the truth of Lawler's story. Warden did not move; but his eyes, the expression of his face, indicated that he did not doubt Lawler's story. But he sought to discredit it.

"What would my men cut your fence for, Lawler?"

Lawler laughed. He had no intention of telling Warden about the confession the men had signed.

"You ought to know, Warden—they were your men."

"Meaning that I sent them to cut the fence?" demanded Warden. His face was red with a wrath that was plainly artificial, or that had been aroused over the knowledge that Link and Givens had failed.

"Meaning whatever you choose to think I mean, Warden," said Lawler coldly. "I'll make my explanations to the sheriff."

Warden had quickly recovered his composure. It was evident from Lawler's manner that Link and Givens had not talked. He had been afraid they might have told Lawler that *he* had ordered them to cut the fence. If they had talked, Lawler would have mentioned it before this—any man would, for no man could have resisted the inevitable impulse to exult over his success in thwarting the men, of bringing confusion upon the author of the scheme. That was what Warden would have done, and he believed any man would have done it.

He drew himself erect and walked slowly to the fireplace; where he halted, turned, and smiled at Lawler—a smile full of malice.

"Your explanation of the killing of Link and Givens

is a mighty flimsy one, Lawler, don't you think? Moreton might want a witness, — eh?"

"There was no witness, Warden." Lawler had not turned. He was watching the door, for he expected the Two Diamond men to enter at any instant, and he knew they would deeply resent the killing of their companions. He did not intend to be taken by surprise.

Warden, standing in front of the fireplace, noted the blanket suspended from the ceiling, swinging between the two tiers of bunks. He started, his face paled, and he looked searchingly at Lawler. And then, observing that Lawler was paying no attention to him, he moved slowly toward one of the bunks — the one Miss Wharton had occupied — noting the disturbed bedclothing. A white piece of cloth, crumpled and soiled, lay on a gray blanket. He took it up swiftly, stuck it into the front of his heavy coat and turned again toward the fireplace. With his back to Lawler he swiftly examined the cloth he had picked up. It was a handkerchief — a woman's — and in one corner of it was an embroidered monogram containing the letters "D. W." It was Della's — he had seen that and others like it, many times, in her hands and at the Two Diamond, on the wash line.

For a long time, with his back to Lawler, Warden fought to control the terrible jealousy that the finding of the handkerchief had aroused in him. His face was contorted with passion; his eyes were aflame with it. He had hated Lawler before; now the passion was a malignant poison that burned through his veins like fire.

He did not trust himself to speak — his voice would have betrayed him. He walked past Lawler, sneering silently as he reached the door, looking back as he opened it and stood on the threshold, muttering hoarsely:

"You'll hang for this, Lawler — damn you!"

Lawler heard the Two Diamond men ride away, and he went to the door at the sound they made and saw they were carrying the bodies of Link and Givens — they were lashed to their horses, which the Two Diamond men had taken from the dugout. He watched them out of sight.

It was only an hour or so later when Davies and Harris clattered to the door of the cabin. They were red and embarrassed, and confessed they had been intoxicated. But they were much relieved when they found that Lawler had headed the herd into the valley; and they were filled with rage when Lawler told them of the fence cutting and the killing of the two men. And they were delighted when Lawler told them to go on duty at the cabin, not even mentioning their dereliction.

Half an hour after the appearance of Davies and Harris half a dozen Circle L men rode up, eager-eyed, overjoyed at finding their "boss." They were covered with snow from their ride up the valley, through the big drifts they had encountered, but the glow in their eyes when they saw Lawler was safe indicated they had forgotten the rigors of the ride.

They told him the herd had reached the shelters and that few of the cattle were missing; and a little later,

with Lawler riding with them, they set out for the Circle L, shouting and laughing like schoolboys.

Shorty, the tawny-haired giant, was with them.

"Cuttin' fences, eh?" he said as he rode close to Lawler. "Well, they're sort of pickin' on us, I reckon. First there's Blondy Antrim; an' now Link an' Givens cuttin' the fence. When you goin' to cut loose an' give 'em hell, Boss?"

"Hell is closer than you think, Shorty," said Lawler, gravely.

CHAPTER XXV

IN WHICH A MAN PLOTS

WHEN the storm broke Warden had shown by his actions that he was more concerned over Link and Givens than over Della Wharton. He had told Singleton to ride the trail to Willets, to search for the girl, while himself and several of the Two Diamond men started for the line cabin. Singleton had left the Two Diamond in the early evening, while Warden had delayed his departure until after midnight.

Singleton had made good time, and he reached Willets long before midnight. He made some inquiries, discovering that Della Wharton had not been seen; and shortly after midnight he was in the low, squatty stable in the rear of the Wolf Saloon, saddling his horse for the return trip to the Two Diamond. He was convinced that Della had not come to Willets.

He was about to lead the horse outside when he saw two horsemen riding through the drifts in the rear of a building near the Willets Hotel. The light was not good, but Singleton would have recognized Red King in any light, and he laughed exultantly as he saw the rider dismount.

Singleton abruptly closed the stable door and darted into the shadow of the stable. Then he crouched, ran low behind a big drift, and gained the side of a building next to the Willets Hotel. He was close to the

two riders, and he grinned maliciously when he saw that one of them was a woman.

He heard Lawler knock on the rear door of the hotel; and he crouched in the shadow of the building until Lawler and the woman entered. But just before the two entered, Singleton caught sight of the woman's face as she turned toward him for an instant and the dull light shone upon her.

He watched until Lawler came out again and rode away; and from behind another building on the other side of the street he saw Lawler going directly south, which direction would take him to Number One Circle L line camp.

Then Singleton mounted his horse and followed the trail taken by Lawler. By the time Singleton struck Lawler's trail, Lawler was out of sight beyond a low ridge, and Singleton leisurely examined the tracks in the snow.

He discovered that two sets of tracks led in the direction Lawler was taking. He followed them for several miles, until there seemed to be no doubt that Della had been with Lawler at the line camp; then he grinned and wheeled his horse toward the Two Diamond.

Gary Warden was also following the two sets of tracks that led northward. He had come upon them accidentally, while riding with one of his men slightly in advance of the others as they went toward Willets, where Warden intended to take the bodies of Link and Givens. He had said nothing to his companion regard-

ing the tracks, though he noted the other saw them also, and was studying them, puzzled.

"Them tracks ain't more'n half a dozen hours old," the man said once, tentatively. But receiving no answer from Warden he said no more.

In places there were three sets of tracks — two going northward, and one leading back. Warden, his eyes glowing malevolently, followed them until they took him into Willets. An hour later, his face flushed with passion, he was in a little office with Sheriff Moreton, demanding Lawler's arrest on a charge of murder.

Moreton, a slender man of medium height with a lean, strong face and keen, penetrating eyes, had listened patiently to Warden's story.

"Lawler told you he killed 'em, eh? Well then, I reckon he must have — Lawler ain't in the habit of lyin'. You got any witness that Lawler killed 'em, malicious? You've just got done hintin' that Lawler said he shot 'em in self-defense. But you say he didn't. One man's word is as good as another's in law, Mr. Warden — you got to remember that!"

"Then you won't do anything?" snapped Warden.

"I reckon I'll do somethin'," said the sheriff, drawlingly. "I'll have to see Lawler an' get his side of it. An' if you charge Lawler with murder, I'll have to bring him in. But I'm warnin' you that if you ain't got any witnesses to prove your charge, you ain't got no show of convictin' him. An' Lawler's standin' is pretty high in this country, Warden — an' don't you forget it!"

Warden smiled derisively. "Well, he seems to have

a friend in you, anyway. I'll investigate a little before I file formal charges."

"It's a good idee—I'd do a lot of it," advised the sheriff. "An' then, when I'd done a lot of it, I'd do some more—just to be sure I wasn't bitin' off more than I could chew!"

Warden left the sheriff's office, after turning the bodies of Link and Givens over to the official. He sent his men to the Two Diamond, and spent some time at a window in the rear of the Wolf Saloon, examining hoof prints on the snow in the vicinity of the Willets Hotel, a short distance from the Wolf. He was in a vicious mood.

He noted that the three sets of tracks he had followed led to the rear of the hotel. They were clear and distinct, for no other tracks were near them. His men and himself had evidently been the first to reach town after the storm had abated—excepting the riders whose tracks he had followed.

He was still at the window when he heard a step behind him, and saw Singleton approaching.

Singleton's eyes were gleaming with knowledge. He was breathing fast.

"I met the boys, headin' for the Two Diamond," he said. "They tell me Lawler downed Link an' Givens—an' that Lawler caught 'em cuttin' the fence. An' Colter says he was ridin' with you an' that you was followin' them tracks that led to town from that Circle L line cabin. Well, that was a hot trail, Warden. She's there—in the hotel!"

"Who?" demanded Warden, his face paling, though

he was convinced that what Singleton would tell him would merely confirm his suspicions.

"Della Wharton!" declared Singleton. He related what he had seen the night before from the stable in the rear of the Wolf; and he stood tense and stiff behind Warden as the latter glared out of the window, his lips in a bestial pout.

Warden spoke at last, his voice dry and light and vibrant with cold fury.

"No women, Singleton; he told me he'd kill me if I dragged any of his women into this deal. And now——"

"An' now he's drugged in the woman you've took a shine to," sympathized Singleton. He scratched his head in puzzlement. "Hell's fire!" he added; "I didn't think that of Lawler. I ain't never admired the cuss none—a damned sight less since he walloped me—but I didn't think he'd drag another man's woman into a cabin like that, an'——"

"Bah! Shut up!" commanded Warden, glaring malignantly at the other.

"Sure; I reckon you don't like to think of it," said Singleton. "It would rile me some, too."

Aware that this was a matter which would not permit of even suggestion on his part, Singleton soon found an excuse to take leave of Warden. And for an hour after Singleton's departure, Warden stood at the window fighting for his composure. Then, when he had succeeded, he walked out of the front door of the saloon and made his way down the street to the Willets Hotel. He told Keller, the proprietor, about Miss

Wharton's disappearance, and he succeeded in simulating an excellent counterfeit of astonishment when Keller informed him that Miss Wharton was at that moment up stairs in her room — that she had been at the hotel since the storm broke. He pretended not to see the flush on Keller's face as he told the lie; and his greeting to Della was distinguished by calm casualness.

Later, when Warden told her that the Two Diamond had been lonely without her, and that the trail was in condition for travel, she readily agreed to accompany him. And, shortly after noon they rode out of town together, Warden apparently in the best of humor over finding her safe; Della elated over the success of the deception.

It was late when they reached the Two Diamond. Several of the men cheered delightedly when they rode into the ranch yard; and Aunt Hannah was tearfully grateful.

However, twice during the evening meal, as they sat opposite each other, Della noted a look of sullen preoccupation in Warden's eyes. And then, studying him covertly while she ate, she observed that he was paler than usual; that his lips were straight and stiff, even when he smiled; that he seemed to have little appetite and was restless and jerky.

Warden was suspicious — that was evident. She had thought, when he had entered her room at the hotel, that his manner was strange and not nearly so hearty as it should have been over finding her. He had been too matter-of-fact and undemonstrative.

She never had loved Warden; she had not even respected him. She had plumbed his nature and had found him narrow, selfish — even brutal. But she had permitted him to make love to her occasionally — mildly, for what doubtful amusement she got out of it, and she had responded merely for the thrill it gave her to have a man pursue her.

When, after supper, Warden called her into his office and closed the door behind her, she had steeled herself for any attack he might make. She was calm, and unmoved by what she saw in Warden's face.

A lamp glowed on Warden's desk, and he motioned her to a chair that stood beside it, so that when she seated herself the glare of the lamp was on her face.

While she sat there, a little malice in her heart for Warden — because he had dared to suspect her — he moved toward her and without saying a word laid before her the handkerchief he had found.

She took it up deliberately, looked at it, and as deliberately stuck it into her belt.

"It's mine, Gary," she said.

"I found it in a bunk at a Circle L line camp, occupied during the storm by Kane Lawler. I thought perhaps you would like to explain how it got there."

"I left it there, Gary — I forgot it."

"You admit you were there?"

"Certainly. Why should I deny it? Do you want to know why I went there, Gary?"

"I'd like to know, of course," said Warden. He was standing, tense, his eyes glowing with passion that he was trying to control; his face ashen.

"I started for the Circle L. I wanted to see Lawler. You didn't know that I had met him one day at the foot of the stairs leading from your office, in town. Well, I did, Gary; and I fell in love with him."

She heard Warden's gasp; saw his eyes glow into hers with a jealous fury that seemed to threaten to drive him to violence.

"Bah; don't be silly, Gary," she admonished coldly. "You know I never have cared for you in the way you wanted. I shall have to respect the man I marry, and I never could respect you, Gary. You are too—too much as you are now. You'd like to punish me, physically; you'd like to hurt me, in some way—if you could. You'll never be a lover to any woman, Gary—you are too insincere. You never have loved me; you have merely been flattered over having me near you. And it is only your vanity that is hurt, now."

Warden laughed unpleasantly; though she knew from the expression of his eyes that he knew she had spoken truthfully.

"Well—go on," he said, shortly.

"That is all, Gary," she laughed. "Except that I got lost and went to the cabin instead of the house. Lawler was there; we were both there—for ten days. And then, because I didn't want my reputation to suffer, I had Lawler take me to the hotel at night, to make it appear that I had been there all the time. Interesting, isn't it?"

"Very," said Warden. "I think I understand. But why didn't Lawler marry you to save your reputation—if you loved him so much?"

Her smile was shallow and hard.

"I expect Lawler thought my reputation didn't need saving—or wasn't worth it. For he refused me, point blank."

"Gallant—eh?" mocked Warden.

She laughed. "Well, I don't know that I blame him. I have thought, since, that I went at it very crudely. I should have played the innocent instead of doing what I did. He's wary as a serpent, Gary, and wise."

"Do you still love him?"

Her eyes flashed spitefully. "I hate him, now! I think I was merely infatuated. I thought it was love, but I can see now that it wasn't. I don't think I ever really have loved a man, Gary."

Warden laughed. He knew she had told him the truth—he could see truth in her eyes.

"He killed Link and Givens," said Warden. "Did you see it?" At her nod he went on: "Just how did it happen?"

She told him, and he evinced disappointment. Then, during a silence, he watched her keenly, a gleam of craft in his eyes.

"How much do you hate him, Della?"

Her eyes narrowed and she regarded him steadily, noting the subtle glow in his eyes. She smiled, with sinister understanding.

"You want me to swear that he killed those two men wantonly, Gary—is that it?" She laughed mirthlessly; "I would do it if—if I didn't have to risk my precious reputation."

"You won't risk your reputation," exulted Warden.

"I'll fix that. We don't want to charge him openly with the murder — and he can't be convicted without evidence. What we want to do is to hold a threat of exposure over him — to fix him so that he won't ever be able to run for an office in this state — as he intends to. For they are grooming him, right now. And the governor is back of the scheme to break him — you know that. If you'll sign a statement to the effect that you were a witness of the murder, and that Lawler was the aggressor, I'll hold it over him, and we'll make him get down off his hind legs and be good. When I show him the statement you can be sure he will never want to stand trial. And we won't force him. We'll let the court at Willets examine him; and they'll have to let him off."

"It would be satisfying — wouldn't it, Gary?" she said, after a time.

"You're a brick, Della!" he laughed.

She got up and stood beside him as he wrote. And Warden did not see the designing light in her eyes as she watched him. And her smile, as she signed her name to what he had written, was inscrutable — containing much knowledge of Warden's motives, and concealing still more of her own.

In her room, while undressing, she laughed.

CHAPTER XXVI

A MENACE APPEARS

SHERIFF MORETON waited for Warden to act, as he had promised. And the sheriff continued to wait. For Warden did not appear with his evidence. It seemed that the power behind Warden had called a truce; that it had been disconcerted by its failures, and was waiting — slowly marshaling its forces for another assault. But the power was working secretly, if it worked at all, for during the winter there were no visible signs which would indicate activity on the part of Lawler's enemies.

Nature seemed to wait, also. The country, between storms, lay bare and naked, bleakly barren where the winds swept; somber in the valleys, with desolation reigning on the coldly gleaming peaks of the hills and the distant mountains.

Willets was somnolent, lethargic. Occasionally a canvas-covered wagon rumbled over the frozen windrows of the town's one street, and rumbled out again, loaded with supplies for a distant ranch; or a group of cowboys, in search of diversion, came into town for a night. But these visitations were so infrequent as to create no disturbance in the dull, slumberous routine of Willets' citizens.

Warden and Della Wharton, accompanied by Aunt Hannah, had taken a west-bound train shortly after

Miss Wharton's adventure in the Circle L line cabin. It was whispered they had gone to the capital for the winter.

Sheriff Moreton had ridden over to the Circle L, to quiz Lawler about the killing of Link and Givens.

"The coroner's verdict didn't incriminate no one," said Moreton. "I told him some Two Diamond men had found the bodies down south a ways, an' that they wasn't no evidence to show who'd done for 'em. Now, Lawler, if you'd give me a straight story I'd be obliged to you."

Lawler gave him a "straight" story, merely omitting mention of Miss Wharton.

"Cut your fence, eh?" muttered the sheriff, gruffly; "well, I reckon they got what was comin' to 'em!"

Lawler had ridden over to the Hamlin cabin twice, making his visits short, for he saw the embarrassment in Ruth's eyes, over what he had done for Hamlin.

A change had come over Hamlin. His eyes held a straightforward gleam that had not been in them for a long time; he held his head erect, his step was springy and full of reliance. He seemed rejuvenated, imbued with a new spirit. Several times Lawler saw Ruth's eyes following him with pleasure; though she blushed when she caught Lawler watching her.

When the mild winds of spring began to sweep across the wide levels, and the sun began to shed its welcome warmth over the land, Lawler rode again to the Hamlin cabin. This time there was an anxious light in Hamlin's eyes; and Ruth was pale and worried.

"There's been strange doin's around here, lately,

Lawler," Hamlin said when Lawler questioned him. "If you hadn't rode over today, I was intendin' to sneak over to the Circle L an' tell you about it.

"The other night I was ridin' north — near Bolton's Shallow — where the old trail crosses, leadin' to Kinney's cañon. There's some new grass there, an' my cattle is dead set on gettin' it. I'd got 'em, an' started back with 'em — easin' 'em down that little gully near the river — an' bein' plumb out of sight from the shallow — when I seen a trail herd comin' — *west!*

"Lawler, I watched 'em. I seen 'em cross the river, still headin' west, easin' off a little to the south. They was above me, an' they was a glow in the north, behind 'em — an' they stood out plain an' clear. An' so did the men that was with 'em, drivin'.

"Lawler, they was more'n fifty men drivin' them cattle — mebbe five hundred head. An' they had three wagons, an' a *remuda* with about a hundred head in it!

"They was takin' their time. I rode back a ways, an' then got off my horse an' sneaked up close to the shallow. An' I seen all the men, clear. I waited until they got a good start, an' then I trailed 'em. They brought up at the Rabbit Ear, at that old house of Rud Dickman's — who cashed in three or four years ago, leavin' nobody behind him."

Lawler nodded. He knew the place. Dickman had been a nester, and since his death no one had occupied the house, and no one had come to claim his land.

"Well?" said Lawler, as Hamlin paused.

"Lawler," said Hamlin, gravely; "there's goin' to be hell to pay in this section. Them men turned their

cattle into the grass around there, an' put a night guard over them. They emptied their wagons and toted the stuff into the house. They fixed up the corral fence an' turned their horses into it. They brought lamps an' stoves for the bunkhouse an' the cabin — an' bunk stuff an' tables an' such. They're figurin' to stay there. An', Lawler — they're *Blondy Antrim an' his gang of cut-throats!*"

CHAPTER XXVII

EVIDENCE

WHEN Gary Warden stepped off the east-bound train at Willets one evening in April — to be met by Singleton, who had been apprised of the day of his coming and who had been in town for two days waiting — there was an expectant smile on his face.

A change seemed to have come over the town. The winter lethargy had been shaken off and Willets was athrob with life and activity. There was a warm wind blowing, bearing the breath of the new sage; doors were open; many horses were hitched to the rails that fringed the walk in front of saloons and stores; and there was over it all an atmosphere that seemed to be vital, electric.

Warden drew Singleton over to a corner of the station platform, from where, between two buildings, they had a clear, unobstructed view of the street.

"Della Wharton didn't come?" asked Singleton.

"No," laughed Warden; "she stayed over for a reception at the governor's mansion, tonight. She'll be here tomorrow." He leaned close to Singleton, whispering:

"Are Blondy and his men settled?"

"Settled!" Singleton laughed deeply. "You might call it that. Blondy an' his gang are runnin' this man's town, right now! They've got Moreton scared, looks

like! He's layin' mighty low, an' keepin' his trap shut. Blondy's got a mighty tough gang—a bunch of hoppin', howlin' tarantulas, straight from hell! Blondy's still raw from that deal Lawler handed him when he brought him here an' dumped him down on the platform, tellin' you Blondy was his 'vent.' Blondy swears he'll kill Lawler for that, an' I'm bankin' that he makes a strong play for a killin'. There's red in Blondy's eyes when he talks about Lawler!"

Warden smiled evilly. "That's Lawler's lookout," he said, venomously; "he ought to be man enough to take care of himself. Let's take a look around."

With Singleton beside him, Warden visited half a dozen saloons and dance halls; smiling as he noted the bepistoled cowboys who were swaggering in and out of doorways and on the sidewalk—strangers to him, but not to Singleton, who grinned and nodded to them as they passed.

Warden spent the night in town. And after midnight, in a room at the rear of the Wolf Saloon—when the sounds of the night's revelry were becoming fainter—he sat at a table with Singleton and Blondy Antrim, talking in low tones.

At eight o'clock in the morning Warden stepped into the door of Sheriff Moreton's office.

Warden's face was pale, and he smiled mirthlessly at Moreton, who was standing near a desk looking over some papers.

Moreton looked keenly at his visitor. "You're back, eh?" he said, shortly.

"Back to perform a solemn duty, Moreton," said Warden. "I have the evidence I spoke to you about. It's too bad, but we are all bound to see that justice is done. I don't like to take this step, for Lawler is a distinguished citizen despite some mighty bad habits, and I don't like to be the one to charge him with that crime."

"Uh-huh," grunted Moreton; "I can see that you're about ready to break down an' bawl right out in meetin'. But I wouldn't do no more fourflushin' in here — it ain't healthy. Where's your evidence?"

Warden laid Della Wharton's written statement on the desk at the sheriff's hand. He watched while Moreton read; he saw Moreton's face whiten; saw his hand tremble a little as he folded the paper and put it into a pocket.

Then he looked straight at Warden.

"I don't believe a damned word of it, Warden!" he said, his eyes blazing. "If that woman was in that cabin with Lawler durin' the storm she kept it mighty quiet. An' Lawler didn't say a word about it when I rode over to see him a couple of months ago!" He glared at Warden. "Where's that Wharton woman, now?"

"She'll get to town this afternoon," Warden said.

"Well, she'll have to swear to this, Warden. I can't afford to act on this — mebbe it ain't her signature."

"Meaning that I forged it?" smiled Warden.

"Meanin' what you damned please!" snapped Moreton. "I ain't actin' in this case till that woman swears she seen what she claims to have seen."

"She'll swear to it," said Warden, confidently. "Meantime, I'd advise you to have a talk with Keller. Ask him who brought Della Wharton to the hotel, and what time she got there." Warden smiled. "I'll see you later, Sheriff."

Warden went to his office; and, after a time, Moreton strode slowly to the Willets Hotel, where for a long time he talked with Keller.

When Moreton emerged from the hotel after the talk with Keller his brows were furrowed and his lips were in a pout. He spent most of the day sitting in his office, glaring moodily out into the street; and when he heard the east-bound train rumble in late in the afternoon he drew a deep breath and got up, muttering lowly:

"It looks mighty like it — for a fact. But Lawler — Oh, hell!"

Within fifteen minutes after the arrival of the east-bound train, Moreton was sitting at the desk in his office, studying Miss Wharton's face.

Della had been met at the train by Warden — who now stood just inside the door of the office, watching her, admiring her self-possession.

For Della was calm and deliberate. There was, to be sure, a paleness around her mouth that was not there at other times; and her lips were set rather tightly. Moreton saw those indications of mental stress — but they were no more pronounced than they should be in any woman who had come to swear she had witnessed murder.

And Della swore to the statement she had made.

She answered Moreton's questions in a low voice, telling him she regretted having to answer them — begging him to keep the matter as secret as possible, for she abhorred publicity.

After Moreton had administered the oath, Della and Warden went out; and for many minutes Moreton sat at his desk with his chin on his chest, staring at the desk top.

He finally got up, buckled on his cartridge belt and pistol, went out, mounted his horse and rode southward.

Inside the sheriff's office, Warden took leave of Della Wharton, pressing her hand warmly, telling her that she had been "great." Della smiled shallowly, not responding to Warden's hand pressure. Her face had grown white and there was a glow in her eyes that she did not permit Warden to see.

Warden left her, telling her she would find her horse in front of his office — where Singleton had brought it. Warden's expressions of regret that he could not accompany her to the Two Diamond were received in silence. Business would keep him in town for a day or so, he said.

Warden went toward the Wolf, and Della walked down the street to her horse, mounted and rode through mounds of back-yard refuse to the rear of the Willets Hotel. She got a man out to stable her horse, and a few minutes later she was in the room she had occupied on the night Lawler brought her to town from the line cabin. She was still pale, but now there was a smile on her lips.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE TRAIL HORDE

FROM the front windows of the Wolf Saloon, Slade, the violent-mannered rider whom Blondy Antrim had left in charge of his men the night he had ridden away from the desert camp fire to hold a conference with Lawler near the trail herd, had watched Sheriff Moreton lope his horse into the soft southern twilight.

Slade was a young man, tall, swarthy, reckless-eyed. He was keen, cynical, and jealous of the power and authority of Antrim. He grinned at Warden, who was standing near, also watching Moreton.

The grin was crooked, expressing reluctance.

"Well the Law is hittin' the breeze, an' I reckon, accordin' to orders, we'll be hittin' it, too."

He left Warden and walked to the bar, where he spoke lowly to several men. Then he walked into a rear room, where several other men were playing cards, and repeated his words. The men ceased playing and followed him to the front door.

Half an hour later, when Sheriff Moreton had vanished into the growing dusk, Slade and the men to whom he had spoken, went outside, clambered upon their horses and rode slowly in the direction taken by the sheriff.

There were a score of them — rough-looking charac-

ters with eyes as reckless as those of the man who led them; and they were silent as they rode, as though on some stealthy mission.

They did not follow Moreton far; they veered eastward slightly after they had traveled several miles, and finally came to a trail that paralleled a small river, which they rode for a time.

Darkness came while they rode, and the twinkling points of stars grew brighter in the cold blue of the sky —millions of them appeared, distant, winking, shedding a luminous haze over the land.

After a time the riders reached a level near the river, and some low buildings loomed out of the haze. A light glowed through a window in one of the buildings — the largest — and toward this the men rode, dropping from their horses at the door and filing silently inside.

In a big room, from which came the light the riders had seen, were many other men.

Antrim, his bronzed face almost the hue of copper in the glare from the lamp that stood on a table, was sitting in a chair near the door. Some of the men inside were on their feet, expectant, suspicious. They grinned when they recognized the newcomers, calling variously to them in greeting.

Antrim got to his feet when he saw Slade at the door, looking at him expectantly. When Slade grinned, telling Antrim that Moreton had ridden south, Antrim's eyes glittered with satisfaction.

"Selden!" he ordered, sharply; "you slope for the Circle L trail an' watch it! When you see Moreton an'

Lawler headin' toward town, you fan it here in a hurry!"

A tall man with two guns sagging at his hips leaped to the door and plunged out. In the silence that followed his departure, they could hear the thudding of hoofs that marked his going.

Antrim grinned coldly around at the other men.

"We'll clean up on Lawler tonight, boys," he said. "We've got to work fast!"

He stood, boldly outlined in the light, a sinister figure. His cruel lips were set tightly, his eyes were agleam. He was a symbol of passion, rampant and unrecking—a wild, violent spirit to whom laws were irksome shackles.

He grinned at Slade, mockingly, naked malevolence in his gaze. His voice was harsh, vibrant.

"Slade, tonight you're goin' to get what you've been waitin' for—the leadership! Ha, ha!" he laughed as he saw Slade's face work with the bitter rage that instantly seized him. "You thought I didn't know you wanted my place—eh? Bah! I've known it for a year. You're ambitious, eh? Well, listen!

"Tonight you're leadin' this little party. You're to run off them cattle of Lawler's—three thousand head—which he euchered me out of last fall. You're takin' three thousand head, Slade—not a one less. If you take less you're through with me. You'll run 'em down through Kinney's cañon, clear through to the big basin beyond. At the other end you'll head 'em south, to Mexico—where we've been runnin' 'em for three years past. You'll take a receipt for them from a guy named

Miguel Lomo, who will be waitin' for you at Panya — where you knifed that Oiler last summer. Warden arranged that.

"You'll post a dozen men in Kinney's cañon, to drop anyone that follows. There's goin' to be no excuses, or you settle with me — afterward. Understand?"

Slade's eyes glared with savage triumph and defiance. He grinned felinely at the other, and when he spoke there was cold, taunting contempt in his voice.

"I'm doin' it, Antrim! I'm tickled to get the chance. But where are you goin' to be tonight?"

Antrim flushed darkly. He laughed. "I'm figurin' to do a man's work — tonight or tomorrow, Slade. Somethin' that you ain't got nerve enough to do — I'm goin' to face Kane Lawler when he's riled, with a gun in his hand! I'm goin' to down him right here in this room!"

Slade started, his face paled. He laughed mirthlessly.

"Well," he said, watching Antrim keenly; "if he's as fast as he used to be — before gettin' to be a big guy in this neck of the woods tamed him — you'll have to be lightnin' — an' then some!"

He wheeled, and went out of the door, where he stood, looking toward the plains on the other side of the river, grinning derisively.

Two hours later Selden clattered to the door of the cabin and dismounted, conveying the news that Moreton and Lawler were riding north, toward Willets. And within a few minutes after the appearance of

Selden, Slade and forty-eight of Antrim's men rode swiftly, scurrying into the star haze, straight into the south wind that swept out of the Wolf River valley.

The men rode close together for more than an hour, until they reached the crest of the big valley, where they halted, closely massed, and scanned the semi-gloom in front of them.

The big valley was silent, somber. There was no movement in it. Looking down from the crest the Antrim men could see the dim outlines of the Circle L buildings; and they had no trouble in distinguishing the ranchhouse, out of which through a window, a feeble glimmer of light came. The other buildings were dark.

One of the men laughed raucously, as he pointed out the light. "That's mebbe Lawler's old woman, settin' up, wonderin' what her boy's been grabbed by the law for," he sneered. "Well, she'll be wonderin' more—after Blondy gits through with him."

Slade chuckled, but said nothing. He was hoping that by this time on the morrow Antrim would have discovered that Kane Lawler could "sling" a gun with the speed and accuracy he had used in the old days.

Far down in the valley, Slade pointed out the cattle. They were scattered a little, as though perfunctorily guarded, but still massed enough to make the task of rounding them up comparatively simple to the big group of men in Slade's company.

"There ain't more'n half a dozen men ridin' night herd down there," said Slade as he pointed out the forms of several horsemen in the vicinity of the herd;

"an' likely enough they ain't watchin' a hell of a lot." He issued some orders, and the group on the crest of the valley split up. Some of them rode west along the edge of the valley, where there was a fringe of juniper and post oak to conceal them; others slid down into the valley directly toward the herd, keeping in the tangled growth that featured the sloping sides of the great hollow. They were adept at this work, and they moved like shadows until they reached the wide floor of the valley.

Then, spreading out, fanwise, a number of them swinging far around the herd so that they approached it from the west, they closed in.

There was no longer any attempt at concealment. A shot from Slade's pistol was the signal for a violent dash that instantly set the big herd in motion. As the attack came from the west the cattle moved eastward, bleating and bellowing with surprise. They moved slowly at first, as though confused by the suddenness of the rush — milling in bewilderment; detached numbers dashing here and there in wild affright.

Concerted movement came when the strange horsemen began to flank them. Eastward there was open ground, with no dashing, shooting men to bar their progress, and eastward they went, a dark mass that moved with exceeding swiftness straight up the valley.

The few cowboys who had been riding night herd made a feeble, astonished resistance. There were several shots, frenzied cries of rage and pain; and then nothing but the thunderous rumble of hoofs; the shouts of the driving rustlers; scattered shots and the clashing

of horns. A vast dust cloud ballooned above the herd; and five riderless Circle L horses trotted aimlessly about, snorting with fright.

The big herd had gone with the suddenness of a cyclone. It went, rumbling up the valley, the dust cloud hovering over it, blotting out its movements. It roared past the Circle L bunkhouses, leaving behind it a number of Circle L cowboys who had been awakened by the thunderous noise. The Circle L men had plunged outside in various stages of undress — all bootless, unprepared, amazed, and profane.

"Stampede!" yelled a hoarse voice.

"Stampede — hell!" shouted another. "It's rustlers! That damn Antrim bunch!"

This was Shorty. The lithe giant had rushed out of the bunkhouse as the herd thundered past. He was now running back toward the bunkhouse, trying to tighten the waistband of his trousers with a belt whose buckleless end persisted in eluding his grasp.

His words had spurred the other men to frenzied action. There was confusion in the bunkhouse where men collided with their fellows as they plunged about for discarded garments, gun-belts, and boots. But soon they began to straggle out of the door in twos and threes and singly, racing for the corral and for the lean-to where they kept their saddles.

Foremost among them was Shorty. His tall figure appeared first at the corral gates, and his long legs were the first astride a horse. While the others were running hither and yon near the bunkhouse and the corral, Shorty raced his horse to the ranchhouse, slid

off and crossed the wide porch in two or three leaps.

He was confronted at the door by Mrs. Lawler, ashen, trembling.

"Rustlers!" he said, shortly, answering her look of interrogation. "Where's the boss?"

The woman's voice broke. "Sheriff Moreton came after him some hours ago—and took him to Willets—charging him with murdering those two men at the line cabin, last winter. He isn't guilty, of course," declared the mother; "but of course he had to go with Moreton."

Shortly swore silently. "All right, ma'am," he said, aloud; "I reckon we'll have to handle it without him! Some of the boys of the night herd are hurt, most likely—mebbe worse. If you'd sort of look after them—mebbe—" He broke off short when he saw riders rushing from the corral toward the house. "I'll stop at Joe Hamlin's place an' send Ruth over, to help you. We can't spare any men—there's a horde of them devils!"

He was leaping for his horse with the last words, and in an instant he had joined the other riders who had paused, tentatively, near the edge of the porch, having seen him. They fled, a dark mass against the dull shadows of the valley, sweeping up the big slope toward the plains.

Blackburn, the range boss, was leading, with Shorty riding close beside him. In the dim distance they could see the herd, spreading wide over the level, running fast in the dust cloud that still followed them.

The Circle L men had not ridden more than a mile

after striking the level when Blackburn saw some blots detach themselves from the larger blot—a number of them, like stray wisps of clouds straggling behind a storm.

"They're droppin' back to pot-shot us," Blackburn said to Shorty. He yelled at the men behind, warning them, and the group split up, spreading out, though not reducing the breakneck speed at which they had been riding.

They had not gone far after Blackburn shouted his warning when a puff of white smoke dotted the luminous haze ahead, and a bullet whined close to Blackburn.

"Rifle!" said Blackburn, grimly.

There were still three Circle L men at the line camps on the range; five had been left behind in the valley when the attack had been made; and only twenty others, including Blackburn, were left to cope with the rustlers.

Blackburn cast a worried glance at them. He had plunged out of the bunkhouse with the other men in time to catch a glimpse of the outlaws as they went by with the herd, and he had roughly estimated their number at fifty. The odds were great, and the advantage lay with the pursued, for they could select ambuscades and take terrible toll from the Circle L men.

Yet Blackburn was determined. He yelled to the others to take advantage of whatever cover they could find; and he saw them slide from their horses, one after another, and throw themselves into a shallow depression that ran erratically north and south for some distance over the plains. Before they reached the depres-

sion, however, there had come more white puffs of smoke from the space ahead of them, and Blackburn saw two Circle L men slide from their horses with a finality that brought a savage glare into his eyes.

"Shorty," he said, hoarsely, to the big man at his side — who had wriggled behind a rock at the crest of the depression and was coldly and deliberately using the rifle he had taken from the holster on his saddle; "we've got to have help — them scum outnumber us. You've got the fastest horse an' you're the best rider in the bunch. An' you've got the most sense. Barthman's ranch is the nearest, an' he's got fifteen men. You hit the breeze over there an' tell him what's happened. Tell him we're whipped if he don't help us. An' tell him to send a rider to Corts, an' Littlefield, an' Sigmund, an' Lester, an' Caldwell. Tell 'em to take that trail leadin' to Kinney's cañon — this side. That's where they're headin' the cattle to. They'll come a-rushin', for they like the boss.

"There's forty men in that gang that's hidin' ahead of us, tryin' to wipe us out. But if they was a hundred we could keep 'em from makin' any time, an' if you'll burn the breeze some, you can have Barthman an' the others at the trail near Kinney's cañon before these guys get there!"

"Hell's fire, Blackburn," protested Shorty; "ain't there somebody else can ride a damned horse? I'm aimin' to salivate some of them skunks!"

"Orders is orders, Shorty," growled Blackburn, coldly. "You're goin', an' you're goin' right this minute — or I'm goin' to bust you in the eye!"

"Well, if you put it that way," grimly grinned Shorty.

He crawled out of the depression, threw himself upon his horse and raced southeastward, yelling, and waving his hat defiantly at the outlaws, who were shooting at him. But the speed of Shorty's horse was too great for accurate shooting; and Shorty kept going —waving his hat for a time, and then, when out of range, riding hard—seeming to glide like a shadow into the yawning gulf of distance.

The depression into which Blackburn and his men had crept was not more than three or four feet deep, with long, sloping sides which were covered with alkali and rotted rock. Along the edges grew greasewood and mesquite bushes, which afforded concealment but not protection. The shallow was wide enough for the horses, though the men were forced to throw the animals and stake their heads down, so that they would not show themselves above the edge of the depression and thus become targets for the outlaws.

The firing during the night was intermittent. Once the outlaws made an attempt to withdraw, rushing concertedly toward their horses, which they had concealed in a sand draw slightly behind them, southward. But Blackburn and his men were alert.

The outlaws had chosen a gully for their ambuscade, but they had made the mistake of leaving their horses too far away from their place of concealment. And when they rushed across the stretch of level that extended from the gully to the draw, half a dozen of them dropped before they had traveled a quarter of

the distance. The others plunged back into the gully, while the Circle L men yelled exultantly.

As Blackburn had told Shorty, he did not expect to rout or capture the outlaws; the best he could hope for was that Shorty would get help in time to head off the cattle before the other outlaws drove them into Kinney's cañon; or that he would bring help to the Circle L men in time to prevent the sanguinary fight which would certainly occur as soon as the day dawned.

And so Blackburn waited, grimly watchful; though worry began to wrinkle his face as he noted that the semi-gloom of the starlit night was lifting, and that a gray streak on the eastern horizon was slowly broadening.

CHAPTER XXIX

ANTRIM STRIKES

FROM the doorway of the cabin on the Rabbit Ear, Antrim had watched Slade and his men ride away. His gaze followed them until they vanished over the edge of the big plain above the river valley. Then, smiling crookedly, he turned back into the cabin.

Two men — one of them the tall man who had ridden away to return with the news that Lawler and the sheriff were riding northward — were draped on chairs watching the outlaw chief. They were expectant, eager; there was covert satisfaction in their eyes.

Like Selden, the other man wore two guns. There was about both men an atmosphere that suggested stealth and violence. It lurked over them, hinting of something sinister and deadly.

Selden wore a mustache that drooped at the corners of his mouth. It was the color of old straw — a faded, washed-out blonde, darkened here and there from tobacco stains. His mouth was large, the lower lip sagging in the center, giving it a satiric appearance, increased by the bleared, narrowed eyes that always seemed to be glowing with a questioning, leering light.

Krell, the other man, was smooth of face, with a strong, bold, thrusting jaw and thick, pouting lips. His eyes were big, but they had a disquieting habit of incessant watchfulness — a crafty alertness, as though

their owner was suspicious of the motives of those at whom he looked.

Selden and Krell had been recruited from the southern border, they represented an element that the ranger service was slowly and surely eliminating — and driving northward into states whose laws were less stringent for the evil-doer — the professional gunmen who took life for the malicious thrill it gave them.

Krell and Selden were "killers." They were Antrim's constant companions, except when the necessities of his trade drove the outlaw to work alone. They knew his whims and understood his methods.

Now, as Antrim paused near the table and looked at them, Krell smiled evilly.

"I reckon we'll be settin' here twirlin' our thumbs till the outfit gits back?" he suggested.

Antrim laughed.

"We're trailin' the outfit right now," he told the other.

Antrim extinguished the light, and the three went out and mounted their horses. Their movements were deliberate, unhurried. They crossed the river, gaining the plains above it, and rode at a slow lope in the direction taken by the others who had preceded them.

They talked as they rode, lowly, earnestly — planning the night's work, speculating upon the probable outcome of the raid upon the Circle L by the men under Slade.

When they reached the edge of the big valley and concealed themselves in the fringing brush, they saw that Slade and his men had already struck. Streaks

of flame were splitting the darkness in the basin; there were reports of pistols — which were reduced to mere faint, popping noises by the distance they traveled before reaching the ears of Antrim and his men; they saw the herd start; heard it go thundering up the valley in a cloud of dust and strike the edge of the plain above, to swing eastward toward Kinney's cañon.

"Slade's sure workin' hard for that promotion," observed Antrim, mockingly. "He's got 'em runnin' fast an' under control."

The three men did not emerge from their concealment for some time. They watched until the herd grew small in the distance eastward; they noted the confusion that seemed to reign in the vicinity of the bunkhouse, where the Circle L men were frenziedly preparing to pursue the rustlers; they laughed at the figures that were darting here and there in the light from the open doorway of the bunkhouse; and Antrim sneered when he saw the ranchhouse door open and noted the form of a man framed in the square of light that shone out.

"That'll be Blackburn, I reckon," he said to the other two; "inquirin' for Lawler, mebbe. Well, Blackburn an' his guys will have to get along without Lawler."

He watched until he saw the Circle L men sweep up the valley, following the direction taken by the herd. He waited until he saw a woman emerge from the door of the ranchhouse. The woman was carrying a lantern, and its fitful, bobbing glare marked the woman's progress as she moved toward the bunkhouse — in

which a light still burned. For an instant the light from the lantern disappeared, and then they saw it again as it bobbed toward the open where the herd had been when the rustlers had struck. Several times Antrim observed that the lantern became stationary—as though it had been placed upon the ground. He grinned coldly as he spoke to Krell and Selden.

"That's Lawler's mother, I reckon. She's huntin' for them boys that was foolish enough to try an' stop Slade. Looks like she's findin' 'em, too!"

Antrim watched until the light began to bob as its bearer went toward the ranchhouse. He saw the door of the ranchhouse open and the woman enter. Then he spoke shortly to the others and they rode down into the valley. After they reached the floor of the valley Antrim spoke again, shortly:

"Get busy; an' keep back out of the light when you get 'em goin'. Meet me back there where we was waitin'!"

Antrim urged his horse toward the ranchhouse, riding slowly. When he reached the big porch he dismounted, and an instant later was pounding heavily upon the front door.

It was opened after an instant, and Mrs. Lawler appeared, pale, anxious.

"Oh!" she said, startled, when she saw Antrim's face in the glare of light from within; "I thought you were one of the Circle L men!" She shrank back a little when Antrim grinned evilly at her, catching her breath with a gasp.

"What do you want?" she demanded.

Antrim crossed the threshold and stood inside, where the light was full upon his face. Repelled — almost terrorized by what she saw in his eyes, Mrs. Lawler attempted to retreat from him; but in an instant he had seized her arms, roughly and brutally crushing them against her sides, while he shoved her back against the open door; holding her in that position and grinning hideously at her helplessness.

"You know me?" he sneered, his face close to hers. "I'm Antrim!" He laughed when she caught her breath; when he noted that she recognized the name.

"I reckoned you'd know me, when I told you," he said. "Luke Lawler knowed me — an' your son knows me! I've never had no love for the Lawler breed, an' I ain't changed any. But there's a lot of things that I'm squarin' up for!

"This is my night; I've been waitin' for it!" he gloated. "I'm cleanin' up on the Lawlers! I'm wipin' Kane Lawler out — cattle, buildings — an' him too, mebbe. It ain't goin' to be a thing you ought to see. You're gettin' away from here — I don't give a damn where. An' you're goin' now!"

Awed by his manner and by the terrible threat in his voice, Mrs. Lawler did not resist the physical strength of the outlaw. Though Antrim's fingers were gripping her arms until the pain made her long to cry out in agony, she made no sound. Nor — now that she realized what portended — did her gaze waver as it met Antrim's. Her eyes glowed with contempt as they looked into his — with a proud scorn that brought a crimson flush into Antrim's cheeks. It had been that

spirit that had always enraged Antrim — that had always made him realize his inferiority to her husband, and to the steady-eyed son who had shamed him publicly at Willets. It was a thing that physical violence could not conquer; it revealed a quiet courage that had always disconcerted him.

"Hell!" he sneered; "you can't come any of that high an' mighty stuff on me!"

He twisted her until she faced the door, and then shoved her before him across the porch and down upon the level on the ranchhouse yard, toward the stable and the corral.

She did not resist, knowing that physical resistance would be futile.

He shoved her into the stable, and she stood there, unresisting while he saddled a horse. She could not see him, but she could hear him as he moved about; and presently he spoke shortly to her from a point close by:

"Here's a cayuse — saddled an' bridled. You want to get on him here, or outside?"

"Outside," she said, coldly.

In front of the stable door she mounted, Antrim helping her despite her scornful protest.

"Listen," he said, as he stood for an instant at the horse's head, dimly outlined. "You'd better go to Hamlin's — that's nearest. An' make arrangements to stay there. I'm burnin' the Circle L buildin's. There won't be a stick standin' when I get through! When I get through, I'm goin' back to my place on the Rabbit Ear. My men have all gone with the cattle,

an' I'll be there alone. You can tell that damned son of yours that! Understand? He's aimin' to get even for what I'm doin' tonight, he'll find me at my place — alone — waitin' for him! Now, get goin'."

Mrs. Lawler did not answer. She took up the reins and sent the horse forward, past the bunkhouses and the corral and the ranchhouse — through the valley and up the long rise that led to the great plains above.

It took her a long time to reach the plains, and when she looked back she saw some leaping tongues of flame issuing from the doors of the bunkhouse. Two or three of the other buildings were on fire; and the windows of the ranchhouse were illuminated by a dull red glare. But the woman made no sound that would have betrayed the emotions that tortured her. She turned her back to the burning buildings and rode onward, toward the Hamlin cabin — trying, in this crisis, to live the code she had taught her son; endeavoring to vindicate the precepts that she had dinned into his ears all the days of his life — that courage in adversity is the ultimate triumph of character — the forge in which is fashioned the moral fiber which makes men strong and faithful.

CHAPTER XXX

A WOMAN LIES

LAWLER had said little to Sheriff Moreton on the ride to Willets. Nor had he made any comment when, in the Circle L ranchhouse, in the presence of his mother, Moreton had shown him the statement signed by Della Wharton. He had silently passed it back to Moreton; and had walked to Mrs. Lawler — telling her why the sheriff had come; smilingly taking leave of her while Moreton, sweating profusely, turned his back and pretended to be interested in a picture on the wall.

"I reckon there's somethin' about this case that ain't been brought out yet, Mrs. Lawler," said Moreton when he was about to depart with his prisoner. "But things has a way of comin' out, an' I reckon we'll get Kane out of this before long."

Outside, on their horses, Moreton rode close to Lawler.

"Kane, I reckon it's a damn lie about you killin' Link an' Givens the way that Wharton woman says you did — in that damned paper — just malicious, without them deservin' it?"

"Moreton, I told you my side of the story a couple of months ago. It's the lady's word against mine."

Moreton muttered much to himself during the ride. He told Lawler how Warden had come to him with

the statement — the charge; and of how he had waited until Della Wharton had personally appeared before him to corroborate what she had signed.

"She don't want to have her reputation dragged into it," sneered Moreton. "Well, before it's over she won't have no more reputation than a coyote! I'll make the thing so damned public that she'll think I've hired a brass band to blare it all over the country!"

Lawler merely smiled. He might have further increased the sheriff's rage by showing him the signed confession in his pocket — the confession he had secured from Link and Givens — but he preferred to keep silent until he discovered why Della Wharton had brought the charge against him.

There were two possible motives. One was that Della was still in the grip of the vindictiveness that had characterized her that last day in the cabin — and had charged him with murder merely to be revenged upon him; the other was that she had been influenced to the action by Gary Warden. He intended to keep silent until events explained the motive. And he smiled faintly at Moreton when the sheriff opened the jail doors for him — Moreton saying that he "hated like poison to do it."

Two persons had watched Lawler and Moreton ride into town. Warden, standing in the darkened windows of the Wolf Saloon — deserted by its revelers shortly before — saw Moreton and Lawler dismount in front of the jail, which adjoined the sheriff's office. Warden watched until he saw the two men enter the building — until he saw Moreton come out alone and enter his

office. Then Warden smiled and walked to the door of a room in the rear of the saloon, where Singleton and several other men were playing cards. He winked at Singleton, a signal correctly interpreted by the other, whose eyes quickened. And then Warden returned to the front window where, later, he was joined by Singleton; for a long time both of them watched the southern sky, into which had crept a dull red glow, faint, and far away.

"Antrim didn't lose any time!" commented Warden, exultantly. "And Della can tell the truth to the sheriff whenever she gets ready!"

The other watcher was Della Wharton. She had seen the sheriff leave town, to ride southward, and she had divined what his errand meant. And she had sat in a chair near a window for many hours, peering into the darkness for Moreton's return with his prisoner. And when she saw them coming she smiled as she had smiled when she had entered the room after taking leave of Warden.

Della knew Warden better than Warden knew himself; and on the night when he had asked her to sign the statement charging Lawler with murder, she was convinced that Warden intended to use the statement. He had told her that he merely intended to hold it as a threat over Lawler's head, to dissuade him from succeeding politically; and she had permitted Warden to think that she believed him. And when, upon her arrival from the capital, he had told her that it was part of his strategy to secretly present the statement to the sheriff — and that she must appear personally be-

fore that official — she had consented, knowing that Warden was insincere.

Della had really felt vindictive toward Lawler on that last day in the line cabin. She had yielded to the resentment that had assailed her over the conviction that she had made no impression upon the man. And she had lied when she had told Warden that she had been merely infatuated with Lawler. She discovered that after she reached the hotel following her sojourn in the cabin with him. She wanted him more than she had ever wanted anything in the world. And she was determined to have him. She meant to win him even if she had to bring confusion upon Warden. And so she smiled as she watched Moreton open the jail doors to Lawler — a smile in which there was much triumph.

CHAPTER XXXI

"JAIL'S EMPTY, KANE!"

THE jail was small—merely one room with barred windows and an iron door, opening upon the street. The iron door was supplemented with a wooden one, which halted the glances of the curious. The windows were high, thus insuring further privacy; the hard adobe floor was clean, and the bunk in which Lawler lay when the dawn came was as comfortable as might have been expected.

Moreton had come in just before daylight, solicitous, concerned, eager to lessen the discomforts of his prisoner. Back of the apology in his voice was a note of rage:

"It goes ag'in' the grain to keep you here, Lawler," he said when he closed the door after entering; "but I'm goin' to bring this case to a show-down today, an' don't you forget it!"

But the sheriff did not bring the case up that day. A little later he provided Lawler with breakfast, and toward noon he opened the door to ask Lawler how he was getting along. On the occasion of this visit he told Lawler he was trying to locate Warden, but so far hadn't been successful.

"An' I ain't found that Wharton woman, either!" he declared. "I'm sendin' a man out to the Two Diamond for both of them, an' if they ain't in town

to appear ag'in' you by night I'm goin' to turn you loose — an' be damned to them!"

It seemed to Lawler that only an hour or so had elapsed when the key grated in the lock of the door and Moreton stuck his head in. His face lacked expression.

"Someone to see you, Lawler," he grunted, gruffly. "Wants to talk to you alone. I'll be right outside, so's you can call me when you've got enough of it."

He pushed the door open, and Della Wharton stepped in.

Moreton closed the door, and Della stood watching Lawler steadily.

Lawler had been standing near one of the rear windows, and when he recognized his visitor he came forward and stood within three or four paces of her.

"Well, Miss Wharton?" he said, quietly.

"I heard you were here, Lawler," she said, evenly, her voice expressionless. "In fact, I saw the sheriff bring you in, last night."

"You expected me, I presume?"

The sarcasm in his voice brought a faint glow to her cheeks. But her gaze was level and steady, containing much inquiry.

"Yes," she said slowly; "I expected you to be brought here. You know, of course, about the charge I brought against you?"

"Why did you do it, Miss Wharton?"

She laughed mirthlessly. "Why? I don't know, Lawler. I expect I did it because I felt I ought to tell the truth."

Lawler's grim smile did not seem to affect her. She met it steadily.

"You say in your charge that I deliberately planned to kill Link and Givens; you said I laid in wait for them at the door. Is that the way you saw it?"

"Yes."

"And you are willing to swear to that?" His smile was incredulous.

She nodded affirmatively.

He bowed stiffly to her. "In that case, Miss Wharton, there seems to be nothing more for us to talk about." He walked to the front window, and stood on his toes, intending to call to Moreton to open the door for Miss Wharton, when she moved close to him and seized his left arm, drawing him suddenly toward her while he was off balance, so that when he turned he was facing her, standing close to her.

The color that had surged into her face soon after her entrance, had gone. Her cheeks were white and her eyes held mute appeal that, she felt, he must respond to.

She saw the cold contempt in his eyes as he looked at her, the lurking passion that lay deep in them, and the disgust that she should lie about a matter that might mean life or death to him.

She must act, now, and she must sacrifice Warden. Her grasp on his arm tightened; she clung to him in seeming frenzy, and she spoke brokenly, pleadingly.

"Lawler, I don't believe what I said—what was written on that paper I signed. I know you acted in self-defense; you couldn't help doing as you did.

"Gary Warden forced me to sign that statement, Lawler — he threatend to kill me if I didn't! He found out, some way, that I had been in the cabin with you. And he made me sign.

"He told me that he didn't intend to charge you with the murder; he said he merely wanted to threaten you — to keep you out of politics. Please believe me, Lawler!"

Lawler laughed coldly, incredulously. "A minute ago you told me ——"

"I did that to frighten you," she declared. "I — I thought that — perhaps — when you saw that I would testify against you — you would —" She paused and tried to get closer to him, but he held her off and watched her keenly, suspiciously.

"Lawler," she urged; "don't you see? I thought you would agree to marry me if — if I told you that. And, now ——"

"An' now it don't make a damn bit of difference what you say!" interrupted a voice from the doorway. Both Miss Wharton and Lawler wheeled quickly, to see Sheriff Moreton standing in the room.

He was grinning hugely, though his eyes were gleaming subtly.

While Lawler and Miss Wharton watched him, he slowly tore to pieces the statement the woman had signed, and scattered them upon the floor.

"That's all of that damned nonsense!" he declared. "Lawler, I knowed they was somethin' behind all this. That's why I let this hussy in to talk to you. I thought I'd hear somethin', an' I did!

"Lawler, you're free as the air! If there's any more of this talk about chargin' you with killin' them two guys, an' you don't salivate them that's doin' the talkin', I will!"

After his first quick glance at Moreton, Lawler looked at Della. The deep amusement Lawler felt over the knowledge that the sheriff had overheard Della, and that the woman's evidence would now be discredited, was revealed in his smile as he watched her.

She saw it. She also understood that she had failed. But she veiled her chagrin and disappointment behind a scornful smile.

"Framed!" she said. "And it was crude work, too —wasn't it, Lawler? I should have been more careful. Ha, ha! Lawler, I should have known you would do something like this—after what happened in the line cabin. And I let you trick me!"

She raised her head, disdaining to glance at Lawler as she walked to the door, in front of which Moreton was standing.

She smiled broadly at the latter. "Mr. Sheriff," she said, evenly; "if you will stand aside, I shall be glad to leave you."

Moreton grinned, admiringly. "You've sure got a heap of nerve, ma'am," he complimented; "I'll say that for you! I don't know what your game is, but you're mighty clever—though you're wastin' your time out here in the sagebrush. You ought to stay East—where there's a lot more rummies than there is out here!"

He opened the door, and bowed her out with extravagant politeness. Then, when she had gone, he motioned Lawler toward the door.

"Jail's empty, Kane. But I reckon we'd better play this deal safe. Dorgan, the county prosecutor, is in his office. We'll go down to see him, an' I'll have him make a record of what happened here. Then, if I happen to get bumped off this here planet them scum can't come back at you, sayin' this never came off!"

Lawler accompanied Moreton to the office of the prosecutor, who took the depositions of both men, attested the document and placed it in the office safe.

"So that's the kind of a dame she is — eh?" grinned the official. "Well, she don't look it. But you never can tell — can you?"

CHAPTER XXXII

RED KING RUNS

SHERIFF MORETON had left Red King at the livery stable, and after Lawler had thanked the sheriff for his part in the little drama that had just been played, he walked to the stable, saddled and bridled the big horse, mounted and rode out of town, toward the Circle L.

While grim tragedy had lurked over the incident that had just closed, the thing had had its humorous side. And as Lawler rode he reflected smilingly, though feeling a pulse of shame for Della Wharton.

In spite of the fact that the woman had charged Gary Warden with evolving the plot, Lawler felt nothing but contempt for the man. Warden's schemes, so far, had resulted only in discomfiture for Warden himself. And because Lawler was not vindictive. he entertained no thoughts of reprisal.

However, Lawler was now well equipped with evidence of Warden's misdeeds. Months before, he had sent to Metcalf, the editor of the *News,* in the capital, the story of the drive to Red Rock, embellished with an account of his adventure with Antrim's gang, his capture of Antrim and the subsequent bringing of the outlaw to Willets, where he had delivered him to Warden.

Metcalf had written him that the publication of

the article had created a sensation in the state, and it appeared from the prominent position in which Metcalf had placed the story—on the front page, with a picture of Lawler dominating; and big, black headlines announcing:

"PROMINENT CATTLEMAN WORSTS TRAIL HORDE!"—that Metcalf had kept his promise to the effect that he intended to "feature" his fight against the power that was attempting to control the cattle industry.

So far, though, Lawler had no evidence that the governor's power had been used against them. He was convinced that Warden, Jordan, Simmons, and the others were employing their talents against him with the secret approval of the governor; but until he secured absolute, damning evidence he dared not openly charge it.

Lawler had been waiting patiently for such evidence. He had felt all along that sooner or later his enemies would over-reach themselves, leaving some weak spot through which he could attack, and he had been content to wait until that time, merely defending himself and his interests, planning no aggressive campaign.

The effect of the assaults of his enemies thus far had disturbed him little. He had been able to anticipate most of their attacks and they had resulted in little harm to himself. They had left him unperturbed, unharmed—like the attacks of an excitable poodle upon a giant, contemptuous mastiff.

Deep in his heart, though, lurked a spark of passion that, day by day, had been slowly growing, warming

him, making his veins swell a little when his thoughts dwelt upon Warden and the others; bringing into his heart a savage longing that he often had yielded to in the old days — before he had learned to control his passions. There were times when he was almost persuaded to break the laws for which he had fought in the old days — moments when it seemed to him that further toleration of the attacks of his enemies would be a sign of weakness. But he had conquered those surges of passion, though the victory always left him with a smile on his face that would have awed Warden, had he seen it.

Something of that passion was in his heart now, as he rode toward the Circle L. It had become plain to him that Warden would adopt any means to destroy him; that in the man's heart was a malignant hatred that was driving him to a boldness that could mean nothing but that in the end they must settle their differences as man to man. Lawler would not always be able to control the passion that lurked in him. He knew it. One day Warden would press him too hard. And then ——

His thoughts had made him oblivious to his surroundings. A whinney from Red King brought him out of his ruminations, and he looked swiftly up, and then directly ahead, to see a horseman racing toward him; the rider crouched in the saddle, the horse running low, coming toward him at a speed that brought him out of depressions with light, flying bounds, and over the crests of small hills with a velocity that was dizzying.

The running horse and the crouching rider were still a mile from Lawler; but even at that distance Lawler recognized Shorty, and he urged Red King on, to meet him, suspecting that nothing but a stern emergency would make the man race his horse at that speed.

Lawler glanced back as he rode. He had come several miles, and the rolling character of the plains behind him had blotted Willets out. He saw, too, that he had reached a point where three trails converged. One — which Shorty was traveling — came westward from the Two Bar — Hamlin's ranch; the other, leading almost straight southward, was the Circle L trail; the third, leading southward also, though inclining in a westward direction, ran to the Rabbit Ear, near the Dickman cabin — the ranch where Antrim and his men had established themselves.

Shorty came on at cyclonic speed. When he reached a point within a hundred yards of Lawler, the latter observed that Shorty's face was pale; that his jaws were set and his eyes glowing with a wild, savage light.

Stiffening, his lips straightening, a responsive passion assailing him, Lawler drew Red King down and waited for Shorty to reach him. He knew Shorty did not permit himself to become excited without cause.

And when Shorty drew his horse to a sliding halt within half a dozen paces of Red King, Lawler saw that Shorty was in the grip of a cold, deadly passion. His eyes were glittering, his lips were stiff and white, and he was drawing great, long breaths that could be heard above the shuddering gasps of the horse he rode.

The giant's fingers were working — clenching and unclenching near the butts of the two guns he wore; and his eyes were pools of icy rage that chilled Lawler.

Twice he tried to speak as Lawler shot a short question at him, and twice he failed, making guttural sounds that betrayed the awful agitation that had seized him. At the third attempt he blurted:

"Lawler, Antrim's gang has cleaned up the Circle L! Damn their sneakin', dirty hides! They've run off our cattle — takin' 'em through Kinney's cañon! They've wiped out the Circle L outfit! Blackburn's left — Blackburn an' three more poor fellows they plugged, an' didn't finish!

"Blackburn made me ride for help — damn him, anyway, Lawler! I wanted to stay with the bunch!" Shorty's voice broke; his lips quivered; his voice rose to a screech of impotent, awful rage. Brokenly, he told Lawler what had happened after the stampeding of the cattle by Antrim's men. He related, in tumbling, rapid, quavering sentences, how he had got the help Blackburn had sent him for — Caldwell's outfit — with the exception of two men who had been sent in different directions to other ranches. And how, later in the morning, he had returned to the shallow gulley on the plains where he had left Blackburn and the others, to find most of them dead. Blackburn and three more had been wounded, but had survived.

"Fifteen men, Lawler!" raged Shorty; "fifteen men wiped out by that miserable gang of coyotes! But damn them!" he added with a fierce, savage joy; "they didn't get away without payin' toll, either!

There's twenty of them layin' out there, Lawler — twenty of them for the coyotes to find. For Caldwell an' his outfit wouldn't touch 'em. When I left, to come an' tell you — thinkin' you was in jail — Caldwell an' his boys was plantin' our fellows, an' takin' Blackburn and the three others to the Hamlin shack!"

He looked hard at Lawler, noted the paleness of the man's face, and then spoke less excitedly, and with deep regret in his voice.

"Lawler, I hate to tell you this. After I seen what happened to our boys, I rode this way, intendin' to tell you. The trail took me past the Hamlin shack. I wasn't intendin' to stop, but it seems like they heard me comin' an' run out to see what was up.

"It was your mother stopped me, Lawler — smiling kind of grim — like she always smiles when things go wrong.

"'Shorty,' she says; 'you go directly to town and find Kane. You know he's in jail, for I told you so last night. Tell Sheriff Moreton to release him; and then tell Kane that Antrim has stolen all the Circle L cattle and has burned all the Circle L buildings. Tell him that Antrim himself burned the buildings, and that Antrim said he would wait for Kane at Antrim's shack — and that he dared Kane to come there for him. 'Shorty,' she said, cold an' ca'm; 'you tell Kane to get out of jail and go to Antrim's cabin, and kill him!'"

Lawler had sat, grim and silent, listening to Shorty. Twice had Shorty seen his eyes quicken — when Shorty had mentioned his mother, and again when he had

spoken of Antrim's action in burning the Circle L buildings.

Now, he leaned forward and peered intently at Shorty, and Shorty marveled how his eyes bored into his own — with a cold intensity that chilled the giant.

"Shorty," he said, in a low, strained voice; "Mother hasn't been hurt?"

"I forgot to tell you that," said Shorty; "she said, 'tell Kane I am all right.'"

Shorty opened his mouth to speak further, but closed it again when he saw Red King leap down the trail — a flaming red streak that flashed over the new grass at a speed that took him a hundred yards before Shorty could get his own horse turned.

The big red horse was lost in a dust cloud when Shorty urged his own animal southward. And Shorty rode as he had never ridden before, in an effort to lessen the space between himself and the flying Red King.

To no avail, however. Shorty's horse was fast, but Red King seemed to have wings, so lightly did he skim over the green gulf of distance that stretched between his master and the vengeance for which Lawler's soul was now yearning. Shorty's horse was tired, and Red King was fresh; and the distance between them grew greater — always greater — slowly, surely — until the red horse was lost in the tiny dust cloud that moved with unbelievable velocity far down the trail toward the Rabbit Ear.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE FIGHT AT THE CABIN

WHEN Red King struck the river trail he was traveling as strongly as when he began his long race. The miles that had stretched between him and the destination at which his rider aimed had been mere play for him. By the time he reached the river trail he was warmed to his work and his giant, spurning stride carried him along in the shade of the fringing trees at a speed that made the wind whine and moan in Lawler's ears.

But Lawler did not offer to check Red King's speed. The big horse was traveling at a pace that was all too slow for Lawler, now in the clutch of that passion which for many months had been smoldering within him. He was leaning a little forward in the saddle, riding the red horse as he had ridden few times; and then only in sport

In Lawler's eyes was still that intense light that had been in them when he had been watching Shorty as the latter had been relating what had happened during the night and the morning.

And yet Lawler betrayed no sign of excitement. His face was pale, and his lips were stiff and white; but his muscles were tense, steady, and his brain clear.

He knew what to expect from Antrim. If Antrim expected him to come to his cabin, Antrim would be

ready for him. He might expect craft and cunning from the outlaw — an ambuscade, a trap — anything but the cold, sheer courage that would be required for him to face an enemy upon equal terms. And so as Lawler rode he kept an alert eye upon the coverts and the shelters, upon the huge rocks that littered the sides of the trail, upon the big trees that Red King flashed past.

Nothing happened. And Red King thundered down the trail where it doubled half a mile from the Dickman cabin, and swept out upon the level that surrounded the place, his speed unslackened, his rider still urging him.

Lawler had forgotten Shorty. Half a mile behind him the giant's horse labored, making better time on the level river trail than he had made over the plains. But Lawler did not even think of Shorty. His brain was upon the work that was before him, his thoughts were definitely centered upon Antrim and the Circle L men that Antrim and his men had killed. It was concentration of a sinister character that had seized Lawler, and in it was a single purpose, a single determination — to kill Antrim.

He saw the cabin as he crossed the level — a patch of bare, sandy earth surrounding it; and the other buildings, with no sign of life near them. His gaze swept the corral, and he saw no horse in it. As he guided Red King toward the cabin he peered vainly for sight of Antrim's horse.

Not a living thing was in sight. The buildings were silent, seemingly deserted. And the atmosphere of the

place seemed to be pregnant with a lurking threat, a hint of hidden danger.

He grinned as he plunged Red King to the door of the cabin—a grin which meant that he expected Antrim would be waiting for him, but which expressed his contempt of ambuscades and traps.

As he slipped from Red King he drew his pistol and lunged forward, bringing up against the cabin door and sending it crashing inward, against the wall.

He halted just inside the door, his pistol rigid in his right hand, which was pressed tightly to his side; for directly in front of him, standing, his arms folded over his chest, was Antrim, a huge, venomous grin on his face.

"Well, you got here, Lawler," he said, huskily. "You come a-runnin', didn't you? Well, I had your cattle run off, an' I burned your buildin's. What are you aimin' to do about it?"

Lawler did not move. He might have killed Antrim, for the man's weapon was in the holster at his hip—Lawler could see the stock sticking above the leather. He had expected Antrim would be in the cabin when he opened the door; he anticipated that the outlaw would shoot on sight, and he had been prepared to do the same.

But there was something in the outlaw's manner, in the cold, measured tone of his voice, in his nonchalant disregard of the pistol in Lawler's hand that brought a swift suspicion into Lawler's mind. It was a presentiment that the outlaw was not alone in the cabin; that he had carefully laid his plans, and that

they did not include a gun fight in which he would have to face Lawler upon equal terms.

Lawler did not look around. He kept his gaze unwaveringly upon the outlaw, knowing that if other men were in the cabin with him they were waiting for Antrim to give the word to shoot him. Otherwise they would have shot him down when he had entered.

"Not sayin' anything, eh?" jeered Antrim. "Well, come a-shootin'. You bust in here, seein' red, with a gun in your hand; an' then stand there, like you was wonderin' if you was welcome." He peered close at Lawler, his eyes narrowing with suspicion, and then, finally, with savage amusement.

"I reckon I ketch on," he sneered. "You know there's some one here with me, an' that they've got you covered. I know you, an' I knowed you'd come rushin' in here, just like you did, killin' mad. Bah! Did you think I'd give you a chance, you short-horned maverick! There's Selden behind that curtain, there —back of the cupboard. An' Krell watchin' you from the door of that room, on the side. They've got you between them, an' if you bat an eyewinker they'll down you. I'm goin' to gas to you—I'm goin' to tell you what I think of you for ropin' me an' draggin' me back to Willets, to show to the damned yaps on the station platform. An' after that I'm goin' to hog-tie you an'—Ah!"

Antrim's exclamation was a mere gasp. It escaped his lips as Lawler jumped backward, landing outside the door, overbalanced, trying to stand upright while he snapped a shot at Antrim.

Antrim, however, had reached for his gun. It came out before Lawler could steady himself, and Lawler saw it. Lawler saw the weapon belch smoke and fire as it cleared Antrim's hip; he felt a shock as the bullet struck him; felt still another sear his flesh near the arm as he let his own pistol off. He saw the outlaw plunge forward and fall prone, his arms outstretched. He was motionless, inert.

From inside the cabin came the sounds of steps — Antrim's confederates, Lawler supposed. He heard them approach the door and he leaped, swaying a little, toward the corner of the cabin nearest him. He had reached it, had just dodged behind it, when Selden and Krell rushed out. At the same instant Shorty thundered up, slipped out of the saddle and ran toward Lawler, drawing his guns.

Shorty had approached the cabin from the rear, having cut across the space behind the bunkhouses when he heard the shooting. He could not be seen by Selden and Krell as they plunged out of the door; but he had seen Lawler when the latter dodged behind the corner of the cabin, and as he ran toward Lawler he drew his guns.

As yet Shorty had seen no one but Lawler. He supposed Antrim and Lawler had exchanged shots and he knew Lawler had been hit — his swaying as he came around the corner of the cabin proved it. Knowing something of the terrible rage that had seized the man, he suspected Lawler had burst into the cabin, recklessly exposing himself to Antrim's fire.

And as Shorty ran toward the spot where Lawler

was standing, he expected to see Antrim follow, to complete his work.

Within a dozen feet of Lawler he halted, facing the corner. He had not long to wait. For Selden and Krell, guns in hand, appeared almost instantly — their faces hideous with passion. As they rushed around the corner they saw Shorty. They saw Shorty first, because Shorty dominated the scene. A gun in each hand, he made a terrible figure. His eyes were blazing with the cold rage that had seized him at sight of Lawler, wounded — for Lawler was now leaning against the wall of the cabin, and his gun had dropped from his hand.

The unexpected appearance of Shorty startled Krell and Selden. Surprise showed in their faces as they paused for an infinitesimal space and looked at him.

And then their guns roared.

Shorty, however, had anticipated them. His guns went off simultaneously, slightly in advance of theirs, belching fire and smoke in a continuous stream.

Shorty did not seem to be hit by the bullets from the guns of the outlaws; he seemed to pay no attention to them whatever.

But the outlaws ceased shooting. Krell staggered, his guns dropped from his hands, and he stood, for an instant, looking foolishing at Shorty, his face becoming ashen. Then, without uttering a word, he lunged gently forward, his legs doubling at the knees, and sank into the dust in a huddled heap.

Selden had been hit hard, too. The shock of Shorty's first bullet striking him had turned him par-

tially around, so that his left side was toward Shorty. He had lurched forward a little; and was turning, trying to use the gun in his left hand, when another bullet struck him. He grunted, stood slowly erect, and then fell backward stiffly.

Shorty ran to him and to Krell, scanning their faces with savage intentness. When he saw that neither of them would bother him again, he leaped around the corner of the cabin and cautiously peered into the doorway. He saw Antrim stretched out on the floor of the cabin, face down and motionless. He stepped into the cabin, turned the outlaw over, grinned saturninely, and then went out to where Lawler stood. His eyes were aglow with concern.

When he reached the corner he saw Lawler bending over, picking up the pistol that had dropped from his hand a few seconds before. Lawler's face was pale, but he grinned broadly at Shorty as the latter came up to him.

"I saw what was happening but I couldn't throw in with you. I reckon Antrim hit me mighty hard. In my right shoulder. I was trying to change my gun to the other hand, when I dropped it. I didn't seem to be able to get it again — just then." He grinned. "Lucky you came, Shorty," he added jocosely.

Shorty's lips grimmed. "I reckon it's lucky I'm here right now!" he said shortly. "You're hit bad, Lawler!"

He led Lawler into the cabin, where he tore away the latter's shirt and exposed the wound — high up on the shoulder.

After a swift examination, Shorty exclaimed with relief.

"It ain't so bad, after all. She bored through that big muscle. Must have struck like a batterin' ram. No wonder you was weak an' dizzy for a minute or so. There's a hole big enough to stick your hand through. But she ain't dangerous, Boss!"

Shorty had not been touched by the bullets the outlaws had sent at him. He was energy, personified. He got water, bathed the wound in Lawler's shoulder; bandaged it, and at last grinned widely as Lawler got up, saying he felt better.

A little later they went out and mounted their horses. Lawler was pale, though he sat steadily in the saddle; and Shorty, big, exuding elation, grinned broadly as he glanced at the cabin as they rode away from it.

They rode up the river trail; Shorty expressing his elation by emitting low chuckles of grim mirth; Lawler silent, riding steadily, his gaze straight ahead.

It took them long to reach the point on the plains where the trails diverged. And then Lawler spoke.

"Shorty, you go back to Hamlin's and tell mother I killed Antrim. You needn't mention this scratch I've got."

"Where you goin'?" demanded Shorty.

"Shorty," said Lawler evenly; "you do as I say."

"I'll be damned if I do!" declared Shorty, his face flushing. "That's the kind of palaver Blackburn handed me when he sent me after Caldwell's outfit, makin' me miss the big scrap. I ain't missin' nothin'

else. If this thing is to be a clean-up I'm goin' to be right close when the cleanin' is bein' done!

"I'm stayin' right here, as long as you stay! An' when you get goin', little Shorty will be taggin' along, achin' to salivate some more of the scum that's been makin' things howl in these parts. Get goin' where you're goin', Lawler!"

Shorty had not told Lawler all he knew of the wound in Lawler's shoulder. He knew that Lawler had lost much blood, and that he was losing more constantly; and that nothing but the man's implacable courage was keeping him up. And he did not intend to desert him.

Lawler laughed. But he said nothing as he urged Red King over the Willets trail, riding at a fair pace, not so steady in the saddle as he had been. His face was chalk white, but there was a set to his lips and a glow in his eyes that told Shorty there was no use in arguing.

Shorty permitted Lawler to hold the lead he had taken when they reached the Willets' trail. But Shorty kept a vigilant eye upon the big horse and his rider as they went over the plains toward town. Twice Shorty saw Lawler reel in the saddle, and both times Shorty urged his horse forward to be close to him when he fell. But each time Lawler stiffened and rode onward —silent, grimly determined, with Shorty riding behind him, watching him with awed admiration.

Lawler had not mentioned the purpose of his ride to town, and Shorty was lost in a maze of futile conjecture. Shorty knew, however, that a man in Lawler's condition would not ride to town to gratify a whim;

and the longer he watched Lawler the deeper became his conviction that another tragedy was imminent. For there was something in Lawler's manner, in the steady, unflagging way he rode; in the set of his head and the cold gleam of his eyes, that suggested more of the kind of violence in which both had participated at the Dickman cabin.

The sun was low when Lawler and Shorty rode into town — Lawler riding ahead, as he had ridden all along; Shorty a few yards behind him, keenly watching him.

There were many men on the street; for word had been brought in regarding the big fight between the Circle L outfit and the rustlers — and a doctor had gone, summoned to the Hamlin cabin by a wild rider on a jaded horse — and Willets' citizens were eagerly curious. And when they saw Lawler coming, swaying in the saddle as he rode, they began to run toward him.

However, they were brought to a halt by Shorty — who waved a hand savagely at them, his face expressing a cold intolerance that warned them away. And so they retreated to the sidewalk, wonderingly, to watch Lawler and Shorty as they rode down the street — Lawler looking neither to the right nor left, but keeping his gaze straight ahead as though in that direction lay what he had come to seek.

Shorty's eyes gleamed with understanding when he saw Lawler halt Red King in front of the building in which was Warden's office. He was out of the saddle before Lawler clambered slowly out of his, and he stood near as Lawler walked to the door of the build-

ing and began to mount the stairs — going up slowly, swaying from side to side and placing his hands against the wall on either side of him for support. And when Lawler finally reached the top of the stairs and threw open the door of Warden's office, Shorty was so close to him that he might have touched his shoulder.

Warden was sitting at his desk when Lawler opened the door, and he continued to sit there — staring hard at Lawler as the latter swayed across the room to bring up with a lurch against Warden's desk, his hands grasping its edge.

"Warden," said Lawler — and Shorty marveled at the cold steadiness of his voice; "I have just killed Antrim. Antrim's men ran off three thousand head of my cattle and killed about twenty of my men — five at the Circle L and the rest in a fight on the plains not far from the Two Bar. Antrim burned my buildings. Twenty-five thousand dollars for the buildings, and ninety thousand for the cattle not to mention my men.

"I've got no proof that you were implicated in the deal; but I am convinced that you planned it — that you got Antrim and his gang to do the work. That evidence doesn't go in law, though, Warden — and you know it. But it's enough for the kind of law that I am representing right now. It's this!"

He drew his gun with his left hand, taking it from the waistband of his trousers — where he had placed it when he had picked it up at the Dickman cabin — and held it on the desk top, so that its dark muzzle gaped at Warden.

For an instant Warden sat, staring in dread fascination into the muzzle of the weapon, his face dead white, his eyes wide with fear, naked, cringing. Then he spoke, his voice hoarse and quavering.

"This is murder, Lawler!"

"Murder, Warden?" jeered Lawler. "One of my men was worth a dozen of you!"

Lawler laughed—a sound that brought an ashen pallor to Warden's face; then he straightened, and turned, to face Shorty.

He lurched to Shorty's side, drew out one of the latter's big guns, and tossed it upon the desk within reach of Warden's hand.

"I gave Antrim the first shot, Warden," he said; "I gave him his chance. I didn't murder him, and I won't murder you. Take that gun and follow me to the street. There's people there. They'll see that it's a square deal. You're a sneaking polecat, Warden; but you—I'm going to give you ——"

Lawler paused; he sagged. He tried to straighten, failed. And while both men watched him—Shorty with eyes that were terrible in their ineffable sympathy and impotent wrath; Warden in a paralysis of cold terror—Lawler lurched heavily against the desk and slid gently to the floor, where he leaned, his eyes closed, against the desk, motionless, unconscious.

Silently, his eyes aflame with passion, Shorty leaped to the desk and snatched the gun that Lawler had placed at Warden's hand. With almost the same movement he pulled Warden out of his chair and threw him against the rear wall of the room. He was after

the man like a giant panther; catching him by the throat with his left hand as he reached him, crushing him against the wall so that the impact jarred the building; while he savagely jammed the muzzle of the pistol deep into the man's stomach, holding it there with venomous pressure, while his blazing eyes bored into Warden's with a ferocious malignance. "Damn you, Warden," he said hoarsely; "I ought to kill you!" He shook Warden with his left hand, as though the man were a child in his grasp, sinking his fingers into the flesh of his neck until Warden's eyes popped out and his face grew purple. Then he released him so suddenly that Warden sank to his knees on the floor, coughing, laboring, straining to draw his breath.

He stood, huge and menacing, until Warden swayed to his feet and staggered weakly to the chair in which he had been sitting when Lawler entered; and then he leaned over the desk and peered into Warden's face.

"This ain't my game, Warden! If it was, I'd choke the gizzard out of you and chuck you out of a window! I reckon I've got to save you for Lawler—if he gets over this. If he don't, I'm comin' for you!"

He holstered his gun, stooped, lifted Lawler and gently swung him over his shoulder; and without glancing back at Warden strode to the stairs, out into the street and made his way to the Willets Hotel, a crowd of curious citizens at his heels.

CHAPTER XXXIV

"GOOD OLD SHORTY!"

DELLA WHARTON had watched from one of the windows of her room in the hotel. She had seen Lawler and Shorty ride down the street to Warden's office; she had seen Shorty come out carrying Lawler; and she heard Shorty's steps on the stairs as he brought his burden up, preceded by the proprietor.

She was standing in the hall when the proprietor and Shorty reached the upper landing, and when the proprietor looked inquiringly at her she silently motioned toward her room, and stood aside as Shorty entered and placed his limp burden upon the bed. Lawler was unconscious and ghastly pale.

Della instantly took charge of Lawler. Which means that she set seriously to work with him, while Shorty stood by, his arms folded over his huge chest, one hand caressing his chin, grimly watching.

Shorty continued to watch. For many days he stood guard over his "boss"—a somber, brooding figure, silent, imperturbable. When he moved it was only to walk slowly up and down the hall, or downstairs to take his meals. At other times he would stand at the bedside looking down at Lawler's closed eyes and ashen face; or he would sit on the edge of a chair and watch him, intently, with stoic calm, his face as expressionless as a stone image.

Mrs. Lawler came early the next morning—after the doctor had told Della and Shorty there was a fighting chance for Lawler; and Ruth Hamlin. Shorty's eyes grew moist as he watched Mrs. Lawler and Ruth as they stood by the unconscious man; and his voice was low and gruff when, during the day Mrs. Lawler asked him for particulars.

"That's all there was to it, ma'am," he said in conclusion. "The boss oughtn't to have busted in that shack like he did, knowin' Antrim was there—an' givin' the scum a chance to take the first shot at him. But he done it. An' he done the same thing to Warden—offered him the first shot. Ma'am, I never heard the beat of it! I've got nerve—as the sayin' is. But—Lordy!"

And Shorty became silent again.

For three days Lawler remained unconscious. And during that interval there were no disturbing sounds to agitate the deathlike quiet of the sickroom. Riders glided into town from various points of the compass and stepped softly as they moved in the street—whispering or talking in low tones. The universal topic was the fight, and Lawler's condition. On the second day of Lawler's unconsciousness a keen-eyed man stepped off the east-bound train and made his way to the hotel.

"I'm Metcalf of the *News,* in the capital," he told Keller, the proprietor. And Keller quietly ushered the newspaperman upstairs, where the latter stood for a long time until Mrs. Lawler opened the door of the sickroom for him. Metcalf entered, looked down at

Lawler, and then drew Shorty aside where, in a whispered conversation he obtained the particulars of the fight and the wounding of Lawler. He took the west-bound train that night.

A pall seemed to have settled over Willets. The atmosphere was tense, strained. Riders from Caldwell's ranch, from Sigmund's, from Lester's — and from other ranches came in; and important-looking men from various sections of the state alighted from the trains at the station and lingered long in the dingy foyer of the hotel. One of these was recognized by Keller as McGregor, secretary of the State Central Committee of Lawler's party. And Keller noted that McGregor wore a worried look and that he scowled continually.

Willets waited; the riders who came into town waited; it seemed to the residents of Willets that the whole state waited, with its collective gaze upon the little room in the hotel where a man lay, fighting for his life.

Shorty waited — still silent, the somber brooding light in his eyes; his jaws set a little tighter, his eyes filled with a deeper glow. Shorty said no word to any man regarding the deadly intention that reigned in his heart. He merely waited, watching Lawler, grimly determined that if Lawler died he would keep his promise to "come for" Warden.

But Shorty would not have found Warden in town. On the night of the shooting Warden had taken the west-bound train, and the next day he was closeted with the governor and Hatfield — the three of them sitting

in the governor's office, where, their faces pale, though expressing no regret, they sat and talked of the fight and conjectured over its probable consequences.

Singleton stayed close to the Two Diamond; and after the second day, Della Wharton rode to the ranch and sat brooding over the failure of her plans. When Lawler had been brought into the hotel she had entertained a hope that the situation might be turned to her advantage. But there had been something in Ruth Hamlin's clear, direct eyes that had convinced her of the futility of attempting to poison her mind against Lawler by referring to her stay in the line cabin with Lawler. She saw faith in Ruth's eyes—complete, disconcerting; and it had made her feel inferior, unworthy, cheap, and inconsequential.

On the fourth day Lawler regained consciousness. The doctor had told them all that the crisis was at hand; that if the fever broke, marking the end of the delirium which had seized him, he would awaken normal mentally, though inevitably weak. But if the fever did not break there would be no hope for him.

Mrs. Lawler, Ruth, and Shorty were in the room with Lawler when he opened his eyes. For a long time the three stood, breathlessly watching as Lawler lay, staring in bewilderment at the ceiling, at the walls, and out of the windows, through which came a soft, subdued light.

Presently Lawler raised his head a trifle, saw them all, and smiled. The clear light of reason was in his eyes.

"Mother, Ruth, and Shorty," he said, weakly smil-

ing. "I've known for a long time that you were here. But I couldn't let you know. Mother and Ruth — and Shorty," he repeated; and then, in a lower voice, that trailed off into a murmur as he closed his eyes and appeared to be falling asleep: "Good old Shorty!"

Ruth and Mrs. Lawler were clasped in each other's arms, joy unutterable in their eyes. It was some time before they turned, to look at Shorty.

The tawny giant was standing near the foot of the bed. His lips were quivering, his eyes were wet, his whole body seemed to be racked with emotion that he could not suppress. He was making an heroic effort, though — an effort that made the cords of his neck stand out lividly; that swelled his muscles into knotty bunches.

"Damn it!" he growled as he turned his head away from Ruth and Mrs. Lawler, so that they might not see what was reflected there; "there ain't no sense of him gettin' mush-headed about it!"

CHAPTER XXXV

HAUNTING MEMORIES

IT WAS many days before Lawler was strong enough to ride Red King to the Circle L; and many more days joined the regiments that have marched into the ages, before he forgot what he saw in Blackburn's eyes when one day, soon after his return to the Circle L, he listened to the range boss relate the story of the fight on the plains. Blackburn's cynical eyes had changed expression. They had become tragic, strained, as though the man was striving to blot out mental pictures that were detailed there — pictures that memory persisted in drawing.

He rode with Lawler to the scene of the fight, and showed him where the Circle L outfit had brought the rustlers to bay.

"After Shorty left," said Blackburn; "me insistin' on him goin', an' him blackguardin' me for sendin' him, there was a little time when nothin' happened. Then the day broke, an' everything seemed to happen at once.

"They rushed us, Lawler. There was more of 'em than there was of us, an' they circled around us, howlin' an' shootin' like Indians. They got us between 'em. But we fought 'em — Lawler, we fought 'em till there wasn't a man left standin'. But there was too many of 'em. We planted twenty — afterward. But about that number got away. I was hit sort of hard, but I watched

'em scutterin' towards Kinney's cañon. They'd been gone some time when Caldwell's outfit — an' Shorty — come up. Caldwell's outfit lit out after 'em; but Caldwell's men had rode pretty hard gettin' to us, an' it wasn't no go. Sigmund's men, though; an' Lester's an' the rest of 'em, had took a gorge trail that cuts into the big basin from the south, away the other side of Kinney's cañon; an' they run plumb into the rustlers over at the edge of the basin on Sigmund's side.

"An' they brought back your cattle; though Slade an' twenty or thirty of his men got away, clean. I reckon you've heard about enough, an'— Well, Lawler, that's about all — exceptin' to tell you how the boys — an' I don't seem to want to go over that when I'm awake; I keep seein' it enough of nights."

But something of the deep emotion Blackburn felt was reflected in Lawler's eyes from the time he heard the story.

During the many days he had spent in the little hotel room recovering from his wound — and in the long interval of convalescence that followed — a small army of workmen had been engaged in rebuilding the Circle L ranchhouse, the bunkhouses, and the other structures. On the second day following his return to consciousness Lawler had called in a contractor and had made arrangements for reconstruction.

A temporary cabin — to be used afterward by Blackburn — had been erected near the site of the bunkhouses, and into this Lawler and his mother moved while the ranchhouse and the other buildings were being rebuilt. Blackburn was slowly engaging men to fill the

depleted complement, and the work went on some way, though in it was none of that spirit which had marked the activities of the Circle L men in the old days.

In fact, the atmosphere that surrounded the Circle L seemed to be filled with a strange depression. There had come a cold grimness into Blackburn's face, a sullenness had appeared in the eyes of the three men who had survived the fight on the plains; they were moody, irritable, impatient. One of them, a slender, lithe man named Sloan, voiced to Blackburn one day a prediction.

"Antrim's dead, all O. K.," he said. "But Slade—who was always a damned sight worse than Antrim—is still a-kickin'. An' Slade ain't the man to let things go halfway. Them boys from the other outfits bested him, all right. But Slade will be back—you'll see. An' when he comes we'll be squarin' things with him—an' don't you forget it!"

It was after Lawler had been occupying the cabin for a month that Metcalf made his second visit. He rode down the slope of the valley on a horse he had hired at Willets, and came upon Lawler, who was standing at the corral gates, looking across the enclosure at the workmen who were bustling about the ranchhouse.

Metcalf regarded Lawler critically before he dismounted; and then he came forward, shook Lawler's hand and again looked him over.

"A little thin and peaked; but otherwise all right, eh?" he smiled. "It's hard to kill you denizens of the sagebrush."

He followed Lawler into the shade of the cabin, remarked to Mrs. Lawler that her son would need someone to guard him — if he persisted in meeting outlaws of the Antrim type single-handed; and then turned to Lawler — after Mrs. Lawler had gone inside — and said lowly:

"Lord, man! you've got this state raving over you! Your fight against the ring is talked about in every corner of the country. And that scrap with Antrim, Selden, and Krell in the old Dickman cabin will go down in history — it will be a classic! What made you rush in on Antrim that way — giving him the first shot?"

Lawler smiled faintly. "Shucks, Metcalf, there was nothing to that. Shorty told me what had happened, and as I recollect, now, I was pretty much excited."

"Excited, eh?" said Metcalf, incredulously; "I don't believe it. What about your going in to Warden's office, offering to give him the first shot? Were you excited then?"

Lawler reddened, and Metcalf laughed triumphantly.

"Lawler," he said; "you're too damned modest — but modesty becomes you. I believe you know it. Anyway, this state is raving over you. You're going to be the next governor. You've got to run! This state needs a man like you — it *needs* you! You know it. Everybody knows it — and everybody wants you. That is, everybody except Haughton, Hatfield, Warden — and that bunch — including the railroad company. Why, look here, Lawler!" he went on, when Lawler did not answer; "the fight you made last fall against the railroad company was made, with variations, by all

the courageous cattlemen in the state. If a strong man isn't elected this fall the same fight will have to be made again. Haughton is so rotten that people are beginning to hold their noses!

"The people of this state trust you, Lawler—they swear by you. You've got to run—there's no way out of it!" He looked keenly at Lawler. "Man, do you know what McGregor told me the day before he left the capital to come down here and look you over, to see how badly you were hurt? He said: 'Metcalf, if Lawler dies we lose the governorship next fall. He is the only man who can beat Haughton!'"

"Metcalf," smiled Lawler; "I'll tell you a secret—your argument has had no effect upon me. I decided this thing as far back as the day following the last election. I am going to run."

"Then we've got Haughton licked!" declared Metcalf, enthusiastically.

Metcalf stayed at the Circle L throughout the day, and in the evening Lawler rode with him to Willets, where he saw him aboard the west-bound train.

"I'm telling you something, Lawler," grinned the newspaperman as he gripped Lawler's hand just before the train started. "McGregor came to me yesterday. He told me he intended to come to see you, but he was afraid you'd refuse to run. He asked me if I had any influence with you, and I told him you'd do anything I suggested. Now, don't get excited, Lawler," he laughed as Lawler looked sharply at him. "I've proved it, haven't I? You've agreed to run! Lord, man, I'd hate to be an evil-doer and have you look at

me like that!" He laughed again, exultantly. "What was it you said to Warden one day, when Warden refused to keep that agreement you made with Lefingwell? Oh, don't look at me that way — that conversation has been printed all over the state. I saw to that. How did I hear of it? Somebody must have talked, Lawler. It wasn't you. You remember what you told Warden? It was this:

"'I'm telling you this, though: A man's word in this country has got to be backed by his performances — and he's got to have memory enough to know when he gives his word!'

"You've given yours, Lawler; and you can't back out. McGregor will be waiting for me in the capital. And when I tell him that I have persuaded you to run, he'll fall on my neck and weep tears of joy. Then he'll hire a special train and run down here to fall on *your* neck!"

McGregor came the next day. And he took Lawler back to the capital with him. Lawler stayed in the capital for a week, and when he returned he went directly to the Circle L.

No word came from him, to Willets, during the summer. He did not appear in town; though Willets heard that the new Circle L ranchhouse had at last been completed, and that Lawler was living in it. Also, the Circle L outfit had been recruited to full strength; Blackburn was occupying the new cabin.

When Corwin — who was chairman of the county committee — sent out calls for the county primary election — which convention was also to choose delegates

to the the state convention, to be held later — Lawler did not appear. He sent a note to Corwin, asking to be excused.

"I reckon he ain't entirely over that wound," Corwin told an intimate friend. "We'll have to get along without him, this time." But there was a light in Corwin's eyes which told that he was not unaware of the significance of Lawler's trip to the capital with McGregor.

There came a day when Corwin and his brother-delegates got on a train at Willets and were taken to the capital. And there came another day when they returned. They brought a brass band with them; and Willets closed its doors and went out into the street — and crowded the station platform, where the band was playing, and where the returned delegates, frenzied with joy, were shrieking above the din: "Hurrah for Kane Lawler! Lawler — our next governor! Hip, hip — HOORRAY!"

"We swamped 'em!" howled a crimson-faced enthusiast; "there was nothin' to it! Unanimous after the first vote! HOORRAY!"

In his office, Gary Warden heard the shouting; saw the crowd, and listened to the cheers. He stood at one of the windows, balefully watching; sneering at the delegates who had returned, flushed with victory. Singleton, scowling, stood beside Warden.

They saw half a dozen men draw apart from the others. Later the men — delegates, from the gay badges appended to them — rode out of town, southward.

"Reception committee," sneered Warden. "They're going to escort Lawler to town. Let's go to the Two Diamond. I'll be damned if I want to be in town to watch Lawler grin when he sees that crowd! There's a dozen big guns in that bunch, who have come down from the capital to watch the fun. Well, it's no fun for me!"

However, it was "fun" for the delighted citizens of Willets, who, some hours later, saw the reception committee returning with Lawler. They escorted him to a platform which had been erected in the middle of the street in the absence of the reception committee, where, after the crowd had cheered him many times, Lawler made his first speech as the candidate of his party.

Energetic citizens had gayly decorated the street with flags and bunting — taking Corwin's entire stock — and the varicolored decorations swathed the town from end to end.

Warden and Singleton had scurried out of town long before the coming of Lawler. But Jimmy Singleton, with a number of other children who had mercifully been dismissed by the school teacher, were close to the platform during the celebration.

"He's gonna be governor, Jimmy," whispered one of Jimmy's companions, awe in his voice as he indicated Lawler, who was just concluding his speech.

"I've knowed him a long time," went on Jimmy's friend, proudly.

"Huh!" said Jimmy; "I've knowed him longer than you. An' besides, he walloped me. An' he walloped my paw, too!"

Shorty had ridden to town with Lawler; and Shorty rode home with the candidate for governor — after the citizens of Willets had shouted themselves hoarse and the prominent men who had come down from the capital had taken the evening train home.

And Shorty said nothing when Lawler veered from the Circle L trail and headed eastward, toward Hamlin's cabin. And he waited with much patience outside the cabin while Lawler went in, to stay an unconscionably long time.

Ruth was alone. And her eyes were glowing with happiness when she saw Lawler.

"Oh, I know!" she said when Lawler essayed to break the news to her. "On his way to town, Blackburn rode over and told me. All of your men were in town — didn't you know that?"

"Ruth," said Lawler; "I will be elected. Won't you come to the capital with me — to be the first lady of the state?"

She looked straight at him, her face paling.

"Wait, Kane," she said, gently. "I — I can't, just now. Oh, Kane, don't you see that the higher you go the harder it is for me. I can't have people say — what they might say — what your enemies would be sure to say! Father is all right now. But I can't depend upon him. We will wait, Kane — until we are sure."

Shorty rode with Lawler after they left the Hamlin cabin. And the gravity of Lawler's expression was noted by the giant, and duly commented upon the following morning, in Blackburn's presence.

"The boss's trail is sure hard to anticipate," said Shorty. "There's the state goin' loco over him — nominatin' him for governor, an' folks in Willets makin' more fuss over him than they did over the President — the time he stopped for two minutes in town. Well, you'd think a man would be sort of fussed up himself, over that kind of a deal. But what does the boss do? He rides home with me, sayin' nothin' pretty regular — with a face on him as long as the moral law — an' then some. I ain't got no rope on him — an' that's a fact. But he's all wool an' a yard wide — ain't he, Blackburn?"

CHAPTER XXXVI

A MAN MEDITATES VENGEANCE

IT HAD always been lonely at the Hamlin cabin and it grew more lonely after Kane Lawler left the Circle L. For the barrier between Ruth and the happiness she had a right to expect seemed to grow higher and more impassable daily.

After receiving official notification of his nomination, Lawler had gone away on a speaking tour of the state, and Ruth had seen little of him. He came home once, for a few days, just before the election, and had renewed his pleas to Ruth. But the girl, rigidly adhering to her determination not to permit the shadow of her father's reputation to embarrass him, had firmly refused to consent. And after the election, when he had gone to the capital to take the office to which he had been chosen by a record vote, she watched him ride away with a consciousness that the world had grown to gigantic proportions and that Lawler was going to its extreme farther limits, leaving behind him a gulf of space, endless and desolate.

Dorgan, the country prosecutor, had been defeated for re-election by a man named Carney—who was known to be friendly to Singleton. Moreton had also been defeated—by "Slim" McCray, who hailed from a little town called Keegles, southeast from Willets. It was rumored—after the election—that Slim Mc-

Cray had been friendly to Antrim, though no one advanced any evidence in support of the rumor.

McCray — because Willets was the county seat — came to the office that had formerly been Moreton's, immediately following his election. He was slender, tall, and unprepossessing, and instantly created a bad impression.

This news came to Ruth through her father, for she had not visited town since she had gone there to help Mrs. Lawler care for her son. She felt that she did not dare to leave the cabin. For one night, after her father had acted strangely, he got up suddenly and went out of the door. And after a while, growing suspicious, she blew out the light and stepped softly outside, to see him, at a little distance from the house, talking with Singleton.

That incident had occurred shortly after Lawler had departed for the capital to assume his duties as governor. She suspected her father had talked with Singleton since, though she had never seen them together from that time until now.

Lawler had been gone a month. She had heard through various mediums — mostly from cowboys from nearby ranches who occasionally passed the cabin — that Lawler was "making good" — in the vernacular of the cowpuncher; and "makin' them all set up an' take notice." Those terms, of course, would seem to indicate that Lawler was a good governor and that he was attracting attention by the quality of his administration.

But it seemed that more than a month had passed

since Lawler had gone to the capital. The days dragged and the weeks seemed to be aeons long. And yet the dull monotony of the girl's life was relieved by trips she made to the Circle L, to visit Lawler's mother —and by the presence of Mary Lawler, who had come home for her vacation, during the summer, and during Lawler's absence on his speaking tour.

Ruth had heard with satisfaction that the Circle L trail herd, attended by Blackburn, Shorty, and other Circle L men, had not been molested on the trip to Red Rock. Caldwell and the others had driven their cattle to Red Rock also—not one of them visiting Warden to arrange for cars. Lawler's influence, and the spirit he had revealed in undertaking the long drive the previous season, had had its effect upon the other owners.

It seemed to Ruth that the fight between the Circle L men and the rustlers had made the latter cautious; and that even Warden had decided that discretion was necessary. At any rate, the surface of life in Willets and the surrounding country had become smooth, no matter what forces were at work in the depths. It appeared that the men who had fought Lawler in the past, were now careful to do nothing that would bring upon them a demonstration of his new power.

Gary Warden, however, was not fearful of Lawler's official power. In fact, he was openly contemptuous when Lawler's name was mentioned in his presence. Face to face with Lawler, he was afflicted with an emotion that was akin to fear, though with it was mingled the passionate hatred he had always felt for the man.

While Lawler had been at the Circle L he had fought him secretly, with motives that arose from a determination to control the cattle industry. Warden had had behind him the secret power of the state government and the clandestine cooperation of the railroad company. His fight against Lawler had been in the nature of business, in which the advantage had been all on his side.

Now, however, intense personal feeling dominated Warden. Lawler had beaten him, so far, and the knowledge intensified his rage against his conqueror. The railroad company's corral had yawned emptily during the entire fall season. Not a hoof had been shipped through Willets. All the cattlemen of the district had driven their stock to Red Rock. And Warden no longer smiled at the empty corral.

Looking out of one of his office windows this morning, Warden scowled. He remembered a day, a year or so ago, when he had stood in one of the windows of his office watching Della Wharton wave a handkerchief at Lawler. She had been riding out of town in a buckboard, with Aunt Hannah beside her, and Lawler had just come from the railroad station. That incident had spread the poison of jealousy in Warden's veins; the recollection of it had caused him to doubt Della's story of what had happened at the line cabin during the blizzard of the preceding winter; it had filled him with the maddening conviction that Lawler had deliberately tried to alienate Della's affections — that Lawler, knowing Della to be vain and frivolous, had intentionally planned the girl's visit to the line cabin.

He did not blame Della for what had happened. Upon Lawler was the blame for the affair; Lawler had planned it all, merely to be revenged upon him for his refusal to keep the agreement that had been made with Lefingwell.

Warden sneered as his thoughts went to that day in Jordan's office when Lawler, a deadly threat in his eyes, had leaned close to him to warn him. Warden remembered the words — they had flamed in his consciousness since.

"But get this straight," Lawler had said. "You've got to fight *me!* Understand? You'll drag no woman into it. You went to Hamlin's ranch the other day. God's grace and a woman's mercy permitted you to get away, alive. Just so sure as you molest a woman in the section, just so sure will I kill you, no matter who your friends are!"

Apparently, in Lawler's code of morals, it was one thing to force one's attentions upon a pretty woman, and another thing to steal the affections of a woman promised to another man.

But Warden's passion permitted him to make no distinction. And his rage was based upon the premise that Lawler was guilty. Warden's thoughts grew abysmal as he stood at the window; and considerations of business became unimportant in his mind as the Satanic impulse seized him. He stood for a long time at the window, and when he finally seized hat and coat and went down into the street he was muttering, savagely:

"God's grace and a woman's mercy. Bah! Damn you, Lawler; I'll make you squirm!"

CHAPTER XXXVII

THE TRAP

FOR more than a month — or from a few days following the night on which she had seen her father talking with Dave Singleton — Ruth Hamlin had been aware that her parent was acting strangely. There had been an interval — directly after that night when he had told her about his talk with Lawler, when Lawler had offered to help him to regain his place among men — that Hamlin had seemed to "go straight," as he had promised. During that interval he had taken her into his confidence many times, to discuss with her the new prospects that the future seemed to offer, and to renew his assurances to her. It had seemed, then, that there was hope for him.

Of late, though, a change had come over him. He no longer confided in her; his eyes were beginning to take on again the expression of guilt she had seen in them in the old days; his glances at her were no longer direct, but furtive, as though he feared she might learn something of his actions should she meet his gaze.

In the old days Ruth had passively endured the shame that Hamlin's crimes had brought upon her. They had been so unexpected that they had stunned her — they had been so miserably mean that she had not dared to take anyone into her confidence.

However, the days of passive endurance were over.

Lawler knew, and Lawler had helped her father. And now, she was certain, her father had again fallen.

She steeled herself against pity for him, determined that she would not stand idly by and watch him betray Lawler. She did not know what she intended to do, or what she could do, to prevent the stealing of the Circle L cattle; but she determined to watch her father, hopeful that she might devise some way to prevent the thefts.

She had passed many sleepless nights, having become aware that her father was habitually absenting himself after nightfall, but she had never been able to catch him in the act of leaving the cabin at those times, though many nights she had purposely stayed awake.

Tonight she had gone to her room, to lie awake on the bed, fully dressed. She had left the oil-lamp burning, for Hamlin had been sitting at a table reading. She heard him get up after a while; saw the light flicker and go out; heard her father cross the floor and go to his room.

There was a fire in the kitchen stove, for the weather during the day had been cold, and she could hear the embers crackling for more than an hour after her father went to his room. After that there followed a brief time when she heard nothing.

She drew a blanket over her, and its welcome warmth brought on a drowsiness to which she almost yielded. She was sure, however, that she would not go to sleep, and she lay there, comfortably for, it seemed merely a few minutes. And then a sound assailed her ears and she started up, realizing that she had been asleep. For

a chill had come into the air of the cabin, and she knew the fire had gone out.

She sat up, breathing fast, and ran to her father's room. The bed had not been slept in; and she emerged from the room, her face pallid with resolution.

Running to the outside door she swung it open and looked out. Far out upon the clear, moonlit sweep of plain stretching toward Willets, she saw the shadowy figures of two horsemen.

Moving swiftly, she went to the corral, caught her pony, saddled it, threw on a bridle, mounted and rode after the two horsemen, urging the pony to its best efforts.

The speed at which the pony traveled did not equal the pace of the animals ahead of her, however, and she steadily lost ground, though the night was so clear that she did not lose sight of the figures in front of her until they reached the shadows of Willets' buildings. She did lose them there, though, and when she rode down the dimly lighted street she could see no sign of them.

There was no one about, and she rode back and forth on the street, searching for Hamlin's horse, which would give her a clue to Hamlin's whereabouts. And at last, peering into a vacant space between two buildings she saw Hamlin's horse, and another, hitched to a rail near an outside stairway.

She got off the pony, threw the reins over its head and ran around to the front of the building, into the light of some oil-lamps that stabbed the semi-gloom of the street.

The building was occupied by the Wolf Saloon. She

knew that, and it was that knowledge that caused her to hesitate as she stood in front of it. But her father was in there, she was certain. She had recognized the horse that had been hitched close to her father's as one that Singleton had ridden to the Hamlin cabin on several of his visits, and the cold determination that had seized her at last gave her courage to swing the front door of the saloon open. She hesitated on the threshold, white, shaking with dread, almost afraid, now that she had come this far, to face the terrible men she knew she would find inside. The ill-fame of the place was notorious.

But while she hesitated, she heard her father's voice —a sound that drove her to instant action, for it was high-pitched, and carried a note of anger.

She went inside, then, no longer thinking of herself; her heart athrob with concern, courage of a high order sustaining her. She pushed the outside door open, burst through the double-swing door that screened the barroom from the street, and stood in the front of the room blinking at the lights.

The room was full of men—she did not know how many. They made a great blur in front of her; and it seemed to her that all their faces were turned to her. She had a flashing view of a multitude of inquiring eyes; she noted the thick haze that hung over the room; her nostrils were assailed by mingled odors that were nauseating. The flashing glance showed her the long bar, a cluster of lights overhead; card tables; a low ceiling, and a stairway leading from the barroom to a platform.

All sound had ceased with her entrance. She saw her father standing near the center of the room.

He was standing alone, in sinister isolation. Singleton was facing him, about a dozen feet distant. A few feet from Singleton stood another man — dark of face, with cruel lips, and eyes that held a wanton light. A little farther away — close to the bar — stood Gary Warden.

Her father seemed to be the only man in the room who had not seen her. A terrible rage had gripped him; he seemed to have undergone a strange transformation since she had seen him last; that manhood which she had thought had departed from him appeared to have returned.

For he made a striking figure as he stood there. He was rigid, alert; he seemed to dominate every man that faced him, that stood within sound of his voice. He had been talking when Ruth entered; he was still talking, unaware of her presence.

His voice was pitched high, it carried a note of defiance; it was vibrant with passion. Fascinated by the change in him, Ruth stood motionless, listening.

"So that's what you brought me here for?" he said, his voice shaking with rage. He was looking at Singleton and the man who stood near the latter. "You brought me here because you wanted to be sure there'd be enough of you to down me. Well, damn you — get goin'!"

His voice rose to a screech of awful rage; and while it still resounded through the room he dropped his right hand and dragged at the pistol at his hip.

It was done so swiftly that Ruth could make no movement to interfere. And yet as swiftly as her father's hand had dropped to the holster at his side, the dark-faced man who stood near Singleton anticipated the movement. His right hand moved like a streak of light. It went down, then up again with the same motion. The air rocked with a crashing report, mingled with Ruth's scream of terror. And Hamlin's gun loosened in his hand, his knees doubled and he tumbled headlong, to fall face down at the feet of the dark-faced man who stood, sneering, some blue-white smoke curling upward in mocking laziness from the muzzle of his pistol.

Ruth had moved with the report of the pistol; she was at Hamlin's side when he fell, grasping one of his arms; and she went down with him, to one knee, dazed from the suddenness of the thing; palzied with horror, the room reeling around her.

How long she knelt at her father's side she did not know. It seemed only a second or two to her when she raised her head and looked around with dumb, agonized grief at the faces that seemed to fill the place. Then she heard Warden's voice; he spoke to the dark-faced man who had killed her father, and his voice was vibrant with a mocking, Satanic satisfaction.

"You've wanted her, Slade—take her!"

The dark-faced man grinned at her, bestially. She leaped to her feet at the expression of his eyes, and started to run toward the door. But terror shackled her feet; it seemed that some power was dragging at her, holding her back from the door. She had not

taken more than half a dozen steps when Slade was upon her.

His strength seemed to be prodigious, for despite her desperate resistance he lifted her from the floor, crushed her to him and started for the stairs. She screamed, begging the men in the room to help her. But through the haze she saw grinning faces turned to hers; heard loud laughter and coarse oaths. And then came oblivion.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

THE GOVERNOR'S GUNS

FROM his desk in the big, quiet room in the capitol building Lawler could look out upon a wide sweep of orderly landscape. There were trees — now stripped of their foliage — in serried array around the spacious grounds that surrounded the building; bushes arranged in attractive clusters; a low stone fence with massive posts that rose in simple dignity above white cement walks that curved gracefully toward the streets.

For nearly two months the huge building — representing the seat of government of a mighty state — had been Lawler's throne. And he had ruled with a democratic spirit and with a simple directness, that had indicated earnestness and strength. There had been a mass of detail which had required close attention; many conferences with the prominent men of his party — in which the prominent men had been made to understand that Lawler intended to be governor in fact as well as in name; and a gradual gathering up of all the loose ends of administration which had become badly tangled through the inefficiency of the former incumbent. And now the legislature was in session.

Lawler had not been able to seize time to visit the Wolf River section. Work, work — and more work had confronted him from the moment he had taken the oath of office on the capitol steps until this minute, when

he sat at his desk looking out of a window at the bleak, artificial landscape.

There had been times when he had longed for a glance at the Wolf River section; and there had been many more times when he had sat where he was sitting now, thinking of Ruth Hamlin.

Something lacked — he was not satisfied. In the old days — when he had visited the capital and had entered the state building to sense immediately the majesty of it and to feel the atmosphere of solemn dignity that reigned within — he had felt that any man must experience the ultimate thrill — the tingling realization that he stood in a spot hallowed by the traditions of the republic.

The thought of serving the people of a great state had thrilled him mightily in the old days. It still thrilled him, but it brought with it a longing for Ruth to share it with him.

Thoughts of Ruth this morning brought Gary Warden into his mind. And he frowned as a man frowns who watches a pleasant scene turn into tragedy.

Only his collapse as he faced Warden that day in the latter's office had prevented him killing the man. He had left the Dickman cabin lusting for Warden's life. The passion that had surged through his veins during the long ride to Warden's office had been the only force that could have kept him going. It had burned within him like a raging fire, and it had upheld his failing strength until he had sunk beside the desk with his passion unsatisfied.

He had thought much of the incident during the days

he had lain in the room at the Willets Hotel, and later, while convalescing at the Circle L. And he had been glad his strength had failed him before he did what he had set out to do. For while there was no doubt in his mind that Warden had been implicated in all the attacks that had been made upon him, he had no legal proof — except the confession, signed by Link and Givens — that Warden was guilty.

And, now that he had been elected, he intended to keep silent regarding the confession. He hated Warden, but it was with something of the passion a man feels who treads upon a poisonous reptile that attacks him.

He meant to be generous in the moment of victory. Those men — Warden, Perry Haughton, Hatfield, and the officials of the railroad company — had performed according to their lights, using whatever power and influence was at hand to gain their ends. But they had failed. Several bills now pending in the legislature would effectually curb the powers of those men and others of their kind; and he would see to it that there never would be another opportunity for that sort of practice.

Lawler got up after a time, and walked to one of the big windows, where he stood for some minutes looking out. Then he returned to his desk, dropped into the chair, pulled open a deep drawer and took therefrom a cartridge belt, completely studded with cartridges. Suspended from the belt were two ivory-handled pistols that had seen much service.

They had belonged to his father. Later, he had

worn them himself — in the days when his character had been in process of developing, when he had earned, with them, a reputation which had made him respected throughout the state.

They were, he felt, symbols of an ancient time. The day was coming when men would ride the open range without guns, when the wearing of guns would bring upon a man the distrust and the condemnation of his kind. Law and order would supersede the rule of the gun, and the passions of men would have to be regulated by the statute books.

He had brought the two guns with him upon the impulse of a moment. He would be away from the Circle L for at least two years, and he wanted the guns where he could look at them occasionally. For they brought into his mind a picture of his father as he had seen him, many times, wearing them; and they reminded him of days when he, too, had worn them — days that had a romantic charm all their own.

CHAPTER XXXIX

SLADE'S PRISONER

WHEN Ruth regained the use of her senses she was lying on a bed in a small, evil-smelling room. An oil-lamp burned upon a little stand in one corner. A door — the only one — was closed — locked. She saw the stout wooden bar in its sturdy side slots.

At first she thought she was alone; and with a hope that made her breathless she lifted herself, swinging around until her feet were on the floor, intending to leap to the door, open it, and escape. A sound arrested her, a chuckle, grim and sinister, in a man's voice. She flashed swiftly around, to see Slade sitting in a chair near the foot of the bed. He was bending forward, his elbows on his knees, his knuckles supporting his chin, watching her with a wide, amused grin.

For a long, breathless space she looked at him; noting the evil light in his eyes and the cruel, bestial curve of his lips. She saw how his gaze quickened as he watched her; how he had drawn one foot under him — obviously to be used as leverage for a rapid leap should she try to reach the door.

"It ain't no use, ma'am," he said; "you're here, an' you're goin' to stay for a while." He got up and walked to the door, placing his back against it and grinning widely as he looked down at her, as she yielded to a long shudder of dread.

During the silence that followed Slade's words Ruth could hear faint sounds from below — the clinking of glasses, the scuffling of feet, a low murmur of voices. She knew, then, that they had brought her to a room above a saloon — the Wolf, she supposed, for that was where Warden said he intended to bring her.

She watched Slade fearfully, divining that he meant to attack her. She could see that determination in his eyes and in his manner. He was still grinning, but now the grin had become set, satyric, hideous. It was a mere smirk. No mirth was behind it — nothing but passion, intense, frightful.

She glanced swiftly around, saw a window beyond the foot of the bed with a ragged shade hanging over it. She knew the Wolf was only two stories in height, and she felt that if she threw herself out of the window she would suffer injury. But she meant to do it. She got her feet set firmly on the floor, and was about to run toward the window, when Slade leaped at her, seeing the reckless design in her eyes.

She had been moving when Slade leaped, and she evaded the arm he extended and slipped away from him. She heard Slade curse. She was almost at the window when he rushed at her again; and to keep him from grasping her she dodged, bringing up against the farther wall, while Slade, losing his balance, plunged against the window, crashing against the class and sending a thousand broken fragments tinkling on the floor of the room and into the darkness outside.

She was alert to the advantage that had suddenly come to her, and she ran lightly to the door and tried

to lift the bar. She got one end of it from a socket, but the other stuck. She pulled frantically at it. It finally came loose, with a suddenness that threw her off balance, and she reeled against the bed, almost falling.

She saw Slade coming toward her, a bestial rage in his eyes, and she threw herself again at the door, grasping it and throwing it wide open. She tried to throw herself out of the opening, to the stairs that led straight downward into the barroom. But the movement was halted at its inception by Slade's arms, which went around her with the rigidity of iron hoops, quickly constricting. She got a glimpse of the room below — saw the bar and the men near it — all facing her way, watching her. Then Slade drew her back and closed the door.

He did not bar the door, for she was fighting him, now — fighting him with a strength and fury that bothered him for an instant. His strength, however, was greater than hers, and at last her arms were crushed against her sides with a pressure that almost shut off her breath. Slade's face was close to hers, his lips loose; and his eyes were looking into hers with an expression that terrified her.

She screamed — once — twice — with the full power of her lungs. And then Slade savagely brought a big hand over her mouth and held it there. She fought to escape the clutch, kicking, squirming — trying to bite the hand. But to no avail. The terrible pressure on her mouth was suffocating her, and the room went dark as she continued to fight. She thought Slade had ex-

tinguished the light, and she was conscious of a dull curiosity over how he had done it. And then sound seem to cease. She felt nothing, saw nothing, heard nothing. She was conscious only of that terrible pressure over her mouth and nose. And finally she ceased to feel even that.

CHAPTER XL

PRIMITIVE INSTINCTS

SHORTY and a dozen Circle L men — among them Blackburn and the three others who had been wounded in the fight with the rustlers on the plains the previous spring — had been waiting long in a gully at a distance of a mile or more from the Hamlin cabin. Shortly after dark they had filed into the gully, having come directly from the Circle L.

Hours before, they had got off their horses to stretch their legs, and to wait. And now they had grown impatient. It was cold — even in the gulley where the low moaning, biting wind did not reach them — and they knew they could have no fire.

"Hell!" exclaimed one man, intolerantly; "I reckon she's a whizzer!"

"Looks a heap like it," agreed Shorty. "Seems, if Hamlin couldn't get him headed this way — like he said he would — he ought to let us know."

"You reckon Hamlin's runnin' straight, now?" inquired Blackburn.

"Straight as a die!" declared Shorty. "If you'd been trailin' him like me an' the boys has, you'd know it. Trouble is, that Singleton is holdin' off. A dozen times we've been close enough to ketch Singleton with the goods — if he'd do the brandin'. But he don't, an' Hamlin has to do it — with Singleton watchin'. We've

framed up on him a dozen times. But he lets Hamlin run the iron on 'em. Hamlin eased that bunch into the gully just ahead, especial for tonight. I helped him drive 'em. An' Hamlin said that tonight he'd refuse to run the iron on 'em — makin' Singleton do it. An' then we'd ketch him doin' it. But I reckon Hamlin's slipped up somewheres."

"It ain't none comfortable here, with that wind whinin' that vicious," complained a cowboy. "An' no fire. Hamlin said ten o'clock, didn't he? It's past eleven."

"It's off, I reckon," said Shorty. "Let's fan it to Hamlin's shack an' say somethin' to him."

Instantly the outfit was on the move. With Shorty leading they swept out of the gully to the level and rode northward rapidly.

When they came in sight of the Hamlin cabin there was no light within, and the men sat for a time on their horses, waiting and listening. Then, when it seemed certain there was no one stirring, Shorty glanced at the horse corral.

Instantly he whispered to the other men:

"Somethin's wrong, boys. Hamlin's horse is gone, an' Ruth's pony!"

He dismounted and burst into the cabin, looking into the two bedrooms. He came out again, scratching his head in puzzlement.

"I don't seem to sabe this here thing, boys. I know Ruth Hamlin ain't in the habit of wanderin' off alone at this time of the night. An' Hamlin was tellin' me that he sure was goin' with Singleton. It's a heap mys-

terious, an' I've got a hunch things ain't just what they ought to be!"

He turned toward the plain that stretched toward Willets. Far out—a mere dot in his vision—he detected movement. He straightened, his face paled.

"Somebody's out there, headin' for town. I'm takin' a look—the boss would want me to, an' I ain't overlookin' anything that'll do him any good!"

He leaped upon his horse, and the entire company plunged into the soft moonlight that flooded the plains between the cabin and Willets.

The ivory-handled pistols were still on Lawler's desk when his secretary softly opened a door and entered. The secretary smiled slightly at sight of the weapons, but he said no word as he advanced to the desk and placed a telegram before Lawler.

He stood, waiting respectfully, as Lawler read the telegram. It was from Moreton:

"Governor Lawler: There's something mighty wrong going on in Willets. Slade and his gang struck town this morning. He was with Warden all day in the Wolf. Don't depend on the new sheriff."

Lawler got up, his face paling. He dismissed the secretary and then stood for several minutes looking down at the pistols on the desk. They offered a quick solution of the problem that confronted him.

At this minute he was conscious of one thing only—that Slade was in Willets. Slade, who had led the gang that had killed his men—Slade, whose face haunted Blackburn's dreams—the man the Circle L outfit held

responsible for the massacre that day on the plains above the big valley.

Lurking in the metal cylinders of the two weapons on the desk was that death which Warden, Singleton, Slade, and the others deserved at his hands. He took up the pistols, nestling their sinister shapes in his palms, while his blood rioted with the terrible lust that now seized him — the old urge to do violence, the primal instinct to slay, to which he had yielded when Shorty told him of the things Blondy Antrim had done.

Another minute passed while he fondled the weapons. Twice he moved as though to buckle the cartridge belt around his waist — shoving aside the black coat he wore, which would have hidden them. But each time he changed his mind.

He knew that if he wore them he would use them. The driving intensity of his desire to kill Warden, Singleton, and Slade would overwhelm him if he should find they had harmed Ruth. The deadly passion that held him in a mighty clutch would take no account of his position, of his duty to the state, or of the oath he had taken to obey and administer the laws.

While he silently fought the lust that filled his heart the secretary came in. He started and then stood rigid, watching Lawler, seeming to divine something of the struggle that was going on before his eyes. He saw how Lawler's muscles had tensed, how his chin had gone forward with a vicious thrust — noted the awful indecision that had seized the man. As the secretary watched, he realized that Lawler was on the verge of surrendering to the passions he was fighting — for

Lawler had again taken up the cartridge belt and was opening his coat to buckle the belt around him.

"*Governor.*"

It was the secretary's voice. It was low, conveying the respect that the man always used in addressing Lawler. But the sound startled Lawler like the explosion of a bomb in the room. He flashed around, saw the secretary — looked steadily at him for one instant, and then dropped the belt to the desk, tossed the pistols into the drawer and smiled mirthlessly.

"Governor," said the secretary; "your train is ready."

The secretary stood within three yards of Lawler, and before he could turn to go out, Lawler had reached him. He seized both the man's hands, gripped them tightly, and said, hoarsely:

"Thank you, Williams."

Then he released the secretary's hands and plunged out through the door, while the secretary, smiling wisely, walked to the desk and picking up the cartridge belt, dropped it into the drawer with the pistols.

CHAPTER XLI

THE CLEAN-UP

THE Wolf Saloon was in a big frame building that stood at a little distance from the back of the street, with a wide, open space on each side of it. Lights were flickering from some of the upstairs windows of the building when Shorty and the other Circle L men reached town. Shorty and his men had ridden hard, and they had seen a horse and rider halt in front of the building while they were yet a mile or so out on the plains. And when Shorty's horse struck the edge of town Shorty headed him straight for the Wolf, veering when he reached it and passing to the open space from which ran an outside stairway. The other men followed Shorty's example, and they were close at his heels when he slipped off his horse and ran around to the front of the Wolf.

Warden had come out shortly before; he was now in his office farther down the street, congratulating himself upon the outcome of the incident in the saloon. He had struck a damaging blow at Lawler. At a stroke he was evening his score with the latter.

Several other men had emerged from the saloon. When Shorty reached the front door four men were just emerging, carrying another. Suspicious, alert, Shorty halted the men and peered closely at the face of the man they were carrying.

"It's Joe Hamlin!" he said as he recognized the other's face.

Shorty's eyes were glowing with rage and suspicion.

"What's happened?" he demanded of one of the men.

"Rukus," shortly replied one. "Hamlin, here, tried to draw on Slade, an' Slade——"

"Slade!"

Shorty almost screamed the words. He straightened, his face grew convulsed. Pausing on the verge of violent action, he heard Hamlin's voice:

"Shorty!"

Shorty leaned over. Straining, his muscles working, his eyes blazing, Shorty heard low words issuing from Hamlin's lips:

"Slade done it, Shorty. An' he's got Ruth — took her upstairs. Shorty — save her — for God's sake!"

Shorty straightened. "Take this man to the doctor — he's hit bad!" The words were flung at the four men; and Shorty was on the move before he finished.

Blackburn and the others were close behind him when he burst into the front door of the saloon.

The saloon occupied the entire lower floor. A bar ran the length of the room from front to rear. In the center of the room was a roulette wheel; near it was a faro table; and scattered in various places were other tables. Some oil-lamps in clusters provided light for the card and gambling tables; and behind the bar were several bracket lamps.

There were perhaps a score of men in the room when Shorty and the Circle L men burst in. Shorty had come

to a halt in the glare of one of the big clusters of lights, and his friends had halted near him.

The giant made a picture that brought an awed hush over the place. He stood in the glaring light, a gun in each hand, the muscles of his face and neck standing out like whipcords; his legs a-sprawl, his eyes blazing with awful rage as they roved around the room, scanning the faces of every man there. The other Circle L men had drawn their weapons, too. But Shorty dominated. It was upon him that all eyes turned; it was upon his crimson, rage-lined face that every man looked. He was a figure of gigantic proportions — a mighty man in the grip of the blood-lust.

"You guys stand. Every damned one of you! Don't move a finger or bat an eyelash! I've come a-killin'!" he said in a low, tense voice, the words coming with a snap, jerkily, like the separate and distinct lashes of a whip.

Not a man in the room moved, nor did their fascinated eyes waver for an instant from Shorty's face.

"Where's Slade?"

He shot the words at them. He saw their eyes waver for an instant from his and they looked toward the stairs in the rear — the stairs that Ruth Hamlin had seen when for an instant after throwing the door of the room open she had glanced down to see the room full of men, all looking at her.

The concentrated gazing of the men at the stairs told Shorty what he wanted to know. He spoke to Blackburn, throwing the words back over his shoulder:

"Hold 'em right where they are — damn 'em!"

Then with a few gigantic bounds he was at the foot of the stairs. In a few more he had gained the top, where he pressed his huge shoulder against the door. It gave a little — enough to further enrage the giant. He drew back a little and literally hurled himself against it. It burst open, Shorty keeping his feet as the wreck fell away from him. And he saw Slade, with a hand over Ruth's mouth, standing near the foot of the bed.

Evidently Slade had been about to release Ruth when he heard the door crashing behind him; for at the instant Shorty emerged from the wreck he saw that the girl's body was already falling — toward the bed — as Slade drew away from her and reached for his guns.

They came out — both of them — streaking fire and smoke. But they never came to the deadly level to which Slade sought to throw them; for Shorty's guns were crashing at Slade's first movement, and the bullets from the outlaw's weapons thudded into the board floor, harmlessly, and Slade lurched forward — almost to Shorty's side — his guns loosening in his hands and falling, one after the other, to the floor. He grinned, with hideous satire, into Shorty's face as he tried, vainly, to steady himself.

"Warden — the damned skunk — said Lawler would come — first!" he said, with horrible pauses. He lurched again, still grinning satirically; and slumped to the floor, where he turned slowly over on his back and lay still.

Shorty glanced at Ruth, who was huddled on the bed; then he wheeled, and leaped for the stairs.

Before he reached the bottom, Ruth sat up and stared dazedly about. She had heard the crashing of the pistols, though the reports had seemed to come from a great distance — faintly, dully. But when she reeled to her feet and saw Slade lying on the floor, his upturned face ghastly in the feeble light from the oil-lamp, she knew that someone had saved her, and she yielded, momentarily, to a great joy that weakened her so that she had to sit on the edge of the bed to steady herself.

It was not for long; and presently she got up and swayed to the door at the top of the stairs, holding onto the jamb while she looked downward. When her eyes grew accustomed to the light she paled.

In the big room were many men. She saw Shorty standing among them — she recognized them as Circle L cowboys. Shorty's guns were out; in fact the men in the group near Shorty seemed to bristle with weapons.

At the rear of the room was another group of men. They stood motionless, silent, and had no weapons in their hands. But some of them were crouching, their faces grim and set.

And then Ruth heard Shorty's voice — hoarse, raucous with passion:

"You guys that don't belong to Slade's gang, get out! Fan it! You Slade men stand! I know every damned one of you!"

There was a short silence, during which several men slipped away from the group at the rear of the room and bolted for the rear door. And then, suddenly, as

Shorty muttered words that Ruth did not hear, both groups of men leaped into action.

Ruth saw the men in the group at the rear reach, concertedly, for their weapons; she saw smoke streaks stabbing the heavy atmosphere of the big room; heard the roar and crash of pistols; saw men falling, to land in grotesque positions; saw Shorty, huge and terrible amid the billowing smoke, shoot a man who tried to leap over the bar, so that he fell across it limply, as though sleeping. She observed another man — one of Slade's — dodge behind a card table, rest his pistol for an instant on its top, and shoot at Shorty. She saw Shorty snap a shot at the man, saw the man's head wobble as he sank behind the table. And then she was suddenly aware that it was ended. A ghastly silence fell. Through the heavy smoke she saw Shorty, standing where he had stood all along — near the cluster of lights just inside the front door. It seemed to her that the room was full of motionless figures of men, strewing the floor.

She was sick and weak, but she knew she must get out into the air or she would faint; and so she began to descend the stairs, holding to the slender railing for support.

She got down without anyone seeing her. No one seemed to pay any attention to her. As she reached a side door — opening into the space from which the outside stairs ran — she looked back, to see Shorty and a number of Circle L men clustered around Blackburn — who was sitting in a chair, looking very white.

She got out into the open and ran toward the street,

hardly knowing what she intended to do. Whatever happened, she did not want to stay longer in the Wolf. She had a feeling that if she could find Moreton she would be safe until Shorty and the Circle L men completed the grim work upon which they were engaged. For she knew that the Circle L men had sworn to square their account with the outlaws — and, knowing the circumstances of the fight on the plains the previous spring, she could not blame them for what they had done.

And yet she wanted to get away from the scene — anywhere.

She halted in front of the Wolf, and saw a number of men on the street — and others running toward the building. She moved down the street toward the station, and as she passed a group of men she saw a man running toward her, shouting loudly:

"Lawler's here! What in hell is comin' off? Lawler just got off a special train! He looks like he looked that day he rode into town lookin' for Gary Warden!"

Far down the street Ruth saw him coming. He was running, and she leaped to meet him, unaware that Shorty and the other Circle L men had emerged from the front door of the Wolf and were listening to the man who had brought the news of Lawler's arrival.

She was aware of nothing but the fact that Lawler was coming. And when, running toward him, she saw him stop dead short, she cried aloud with joy:

"O Kane! Kane!"

And then his big arms went around her, and she nestled close to him, shuddering, sobbing, laughing.

Excitedly, rapidly, as he held her, she related the story of the night's adventure. Then Shorty and the others came up. She and Lawler were standing in front of a store, in a glare of light that came through a big window; and she saw his lips straighten when she told him what Slade had done.

"Shorty," he said, grimly; "take care of her."

And then, despite her struggles — for she knew that he was going to seek Warden — she found herself a captive in the giant's arms, while Lawler ran down the street toward Warden's office.

CHAPTER XLII

GOING EAST

WITHIN fifteen minutes after he had left Ruth Hamlin with Slade at the side door of the Wolf, Warden had sent a telegram to Lawler, at the capital, informing him that the girl might be found at the brothel with the outlaw. He had signed no name to the telegram, but that did not lessen the venomous satisfaction he felt over sending it.

It had been nearly eleven o'clock when Warden sent the wire and, allowing for some minutes of waste time before the message could be delivered, and the space of time that must elapse before Lawler could reach Willets — even if he came on a special train — he knew that Lawler could not arrive before the early hours of the morning.

Lawler, Warden knew, would be in a killing mood when he reached Willets. And he knew, also, that Slade would be waiting for Lawler, and that he would kill Lawler on sight.

Slade would have to kill Lawler, for Lawler, as governor, had the power to be revenged upon the outlaw for the abduction of Ruth; and Slade would know that Lawler would use that power to the limit. If Slade killed Lawler, that would be another matter. The outlaw would have to hide, to evade the clutches of the law. But hiding was not more than Slade had been

accustomed to for years, and that necessity would work no hardship upon him.

That was Warden's reasoning. Perhaps it was faulty, for it hinged upon the vagaries of a wanton character who could not be depended upon. But Warden had to take that chance.

And Warden's reasoning, of late, had been influenced by his passionate hatred of Lawler. That hatred had warped his judgment until he had become a creature guided by the savage impulses that filled his brain.

When he left Slade and Ruth at the door of the Wolf, he went directly to his office, taking Singleton with him. He lit a kerosene lamp, built a fire in the small stove that stood in a corner; seated himself in a chair, motioned Singleton to another, lit a cigar and smoked—his eyes gleaming with the vindictive joy he felt.

However, the cigar in his mouth was not half smoked, when from a distance, on the steady west wind, was borne to his ears the faint, wailing shriek of a locomotive whistle.

The cigar drooped from his lips and he looked swiftly at Singleton. Singleton had heard the sound, too, for his eyes had narrowed and his attitude had become tense.

That both men had the same thought was evidenced by the glance they exchanged—incipient apprehension.

"It's a freight, likely," muttered Singleton.

Warden took a nervous puff at his cigar. Then he got up, walked to a window and stood, looking out into the night. He stood there for a few minutes, Singleton

watching him — until the whistle shrieked again and a muffled roar reached their ears. Then Warden turned, his face ashen.

"Singleton, it's a special!" he said, jerkily; "an engine and one car!"

Singleton got up and walked to the window, beside Warden. As they stood there, they saw the train stop at the station. They saw, in the dim light from the coach, the figure of a tall man alight and dart across the platform, to vanish in the shadow of the station. Simultaneously, there came to their ears the staccato reports of pistols, the sounds rendered faint and muffled by distance.

Singleton flashed around, his face pale and his eyes bulging.

"It's Lawler! I'd know him among a million! An' somethin's happened at the Wolf. That's where the shootin' is! Warden," he said, nervously; "it looks like there's goin' to be hell to pay!"

Warden's face was ashen, but he laughed.

"Don't worry, Singleton; Slade will take care of Lawler," he said. But the words carried no conviction with them — they had been uttered without expression.

Warden walked to the door and gazed down the dimly lighted stairway. There was suppressed excitement in his manner, nervous anxiety in his eyes. He walked back into the room, threw his cigar into a cuspidor, and stood with his back to the stove, listening.

Singleton said nothing; though his lips had settled into a pout and his eyes had a sullen, malignant expression. He, too, was wishing — what Warden was

wishing — that Slade would kill Lawler. The death of Lawler would make the future safe for both of them; it would remove a menace to their lives and a barrier to their schemes for the autocratic control of the cattle industry.

But they doubted. Deep in their hearts lurked a fear that something had gone wrong — which thought was suggested by the sounds of the shooting they had heard.

Singleton had become afflicted with the nervousness that had seized Warden. The pout on his lips grew; he cast startled, inquiring glances toward the door. And at last, as they stood silent, looking at each other, there came a sound — close; the sound of a man walking in the street. As they listened the sound came closer, reached the front of the building. Then they heard it on the stairs. Warden stiffened, and Singleton drew his gun. An instant later the door crashed inward, and Lawler stood in the opening, his eyes flaming with the cold wrath that had been in them on the day when, after he had killed Antrim, he had come to Warden's office for a like purpose.

There was no word spoken. Lawler saw the gun in Singleton's hand. He leaped quickly to one side as Singleton pulled the trigger — the smoke streak touching his clothing as he moved. He leaped again as Singleton shot at him a second time. This time he was so close to Singleton that the powder burned his face. And before Singleton could shoot again Lawler struck — with the precision and force that he had put into his blows that day in the schoolhouse.

Singleton reeled headlong across the room, bringing up against the farther wall, striking it with his head and tumbling to the floor beside it.

Then, his lips set stiffly, his eyes flaming with a fire that brought terror into Warden's heart, he faced the other.

"Now, damn you; I'll teach you to make war on women!" He leaped forward, striking at Warden with terrific energy.

Still struggling in Shorty's arms, Ruth heard Singleton's shots. She broke away from Shorty, noting with dull astonishment that Shorty seemed almost to have permitted it, and ran down the street toward Warden's office. As she ran she heard a tumult behind her, and steps close beside her. She glanced swiftly over her shoulder, to see Shorty beside her. The giant was taking steps that dwarfed hers, and while she looked at him he drew past her. She heard him muttering as he passed — caught his words:

Lawler ain't got no gun — I seen that!"

She ran faster than ever at that, and when Shorty reached the foot of the stairs leading to Warden's office she was at his heels.

There were other men behind her — a multitude. She felt them pressing close behind her as she ran up the stairs. But she did not look back, for she heard sounds of a conflict in Warden's office — the thud and jar of blows, the crashing of furniture overturned and smashed; the scuffling of feet on the floors — and screams of rage — in Warden's voice.

When she reached the top of the stairs and looked into the room between Shorty's shoulder and the door jamb, she screamed with apprehension. For she saw Singleton, with blood dripping from a huge gash in his cheek, in the act of picking up a pistol that, evidently, had fallen on the floor during the fight that must have raged in the room.

Singleton's face was hideous with rage. It was evident that he did not see Shorty and herself at the door — and that he had not heard the tramping of the many feet on the stairs. He was apparently oblivious to everything but the fact that the pistol was there and that he had an opportunity to use it.

Ruth saw Warden and Lawler fighting in a corner. Warden's back was against the wall, near the stove. He was facing the door. His lips were lacerated, drooling blood, his eyes were puffed and blackened, and he was screaming and cursing insanely.

As Ruth watched, her gaze taking in the wreck of the room — and Singleton picking up the pistol — she saw Lawler strike Warden — a full sweeping blow that sent forth a sodden deadening sound as it landed.

Warden sagged, his eyes closing as he slid to the floor and sat in the corner his legs doubled under him, his chin on his chest.

The scene had held only for an instant — merely while Ruth screamed. The sound had hardly died away when Singleton succeeded in grasping the pistol. Ruth tried to squeeze past Shorty, to prevent the tragedy that seemed imminent. But Shorty's quick, flashing motion checked her — made interference by

her unnecessary. There was a flash at Shorty's side, and the crash of his pistol rocked the air in the room and the hallway. Singleton straightened, turned slowly, looked full at Shorty. Then without uttering a sound he pitched forward, almost at Lawler's feet.

The roar of the pistol brought Lawler around so that he faced the door. He saw Shorty and Ruth and the others behind them, but gave no sign. His rage had left him; he seemed coldly deliberate. The only sign of passion about him was in his eyes. They were narrowed, and pin points of fire appeared to flame in them. As though there were no witnesses to what he was doing, he stooped, lifted Warden and threw him over his shoulder. The crowd gave way before him as he started for the stairs — even Ruth and Shorty stepping aside to let him pass. They watched him wonderingly as he carried his burden down the stairs and out into the street. And then as he walked they followed him.

He went straight across the street, past some low buildings, and over a vacant stretch between the buildings and the station. The crowd followed him — Ruth and Shorty closely, silently watching.

The special train in which he had come was still standing beside the station platform, the engine panting as though from its long run eastward. Ruth noted that the train crew was on the platform near the engine, interestedly watching the approach of Lawler carrying his burden.

Lawler walked to the rear end of the coach and

threw Warden bodily upon it. Then he turned and motioned toward the conductor. The latter approached him warily, seeming doubtful of what might be in store for him from a man, who though governor — thus carried the body of a man on his shoulder. But he listened respectfully when he observed the clear sanity of Lawler's eyes.

"This man is leaving Willets — immediately!" said Lawler. "He's going East, to the end of this line — at my expense. When he regains consciousness you will tell him what I have said."

"It's Warden, ain't it?" grinned the conductor. "Well, I'll be glad to take him. But I'll have to wire for orders. This guy ain't a *bona fide* passenger."

He strode to the telegrapher's window. There was a short wait; and during the interval Warden stirred and sat up, swaying from side to side and staring about him in bewilderment. Lawler stepped forward, leaned over the platform.

"Warden," he said; "you are going East. You are not coming back. If you ever step a foot into this state again I will send you to prison for a term that will make you wish you were dead. I have a signed confession from Link and Givens that convicts you of a crime for which this state provides an adequate penalty. Do you understand?"

Warden nodded, wearily, and dropped his chin to his chest. After an interval, during which the crowd watched him intently, he staggered to his feet and reeled into the coach, and the crowd saw him no more.

An instant later the conductor went toward the coach, grinning, signaling the engineer.

A low cheer rose from the crowd as the train started, and a man far back toward the station shouted, loudly:

"If they hadn't been in such a damned hurry, we'd have raised a collection to send him to hell!"

A little later Lawler and Ruth and Shorty formed the van of the crowd that walked down the street toward the Wolf—where the Circle L men had left their horses. Ruth walked between Lawler and Shorty. Ruth was very pale, and her lips were trembling. In front of the Willets Hotel—in the flood of light that came through the windows, she clutched at Lawler's sleeve.

"Hurry, Kane," she begged; "they have killed daddy!"

"Don't you believe it, Miss Ruth," said Shorty, softly, into her ear. "When I left Joe Hamlin he was a whole lot alive—an' gettin' more alive right along. I left Andy Miller with him—an' Andy's got more sabe of medicine than any doctor in these parts!"

"Shorty!" she breathed, springing around in front of him and catching him by the shoulders—standing on tip-toe to do it. "*Shorty*, you don't mean it?"

Shorty laughed lowly. "I'm reckonin' to mean it, Miss Ruth."

"But how," she questioned, her hands still on his shoulders, her eyes wide and questioning; "how did you happen to go to the Two Bar?"

"Well, you see, Miss Ruth," laughed the giant—while the crowd which had followed them stood off at a little distance and watched—"it was like this. Me an' the boys—an' your dad—had been tryin' for a long time to ketch Singleton runnin' an iron on the Circle L cattle. Your dad an' me had run a bunch into that gully near the Two Bar, an' tonight me an' the boys was waitin' in the gully for your dad to bring Singleton there. Your dad had been brandin' stolen stock—at my orders—an' tonight he was goin' to refuse—makin' Singleton do it. For Singleton was really doin' the rustlin'. An' your dad——"

"Was doing it all for you? Is that what you mean, Shorty?"

"Why, I reckon, Miss Ruth. You see——"

Ruth had to leap upward to do it. But somehow the height was achieved. Two arms went around Shorty's neck and Ruth's lips were pressed against his with a resounding smack.

"O Shorty!" she exclaimed as she hugged him tightly, after kissing him; "I just *love* you!"

Shorty blushed furiously. As soon as Ruth released him he grinned with embarrassment and walked with giant strides down the street to where he and his men had left the horses, the laughter and jibes of his fellows following him.

CHAPTER XLIII

THE MAJESTY OF PEACE

AS UPON another day that was vivid in his memory, Governor Lawler sat at his desk in his office in the capitol building. A big, keen-eyed man of imposing appearance was sitting at a little distance from Lawler, watching him. The big man was talking, but the governor seemed to be looking past him — at the bare trees that dotted the spacious grounds around the building. His gaze seemed to follow the low stone fence with its massive posts that seemed to hint of the majesty of the government Lawler served; it appeared that he was studying the bleak landscape, and that he was not interested in what the big man was saying.

But Lawler was not interested in the landscape. For many minutes, while listening to the big man — and answering him occasionally — he had been watching for a trim little figure that he knew would presently appear on one of the white walks leading to the great, wide steps that led to the entrance to the building. For he had heard the long-drawn plaint of a locomotive whistle some minutes before; he had seen the train itself come gliding over the mammoth plains that stretched eastward from the capitol; and he knew that Ruth would be on the train.

"The proposed bill is iniquitous," said the big man. "It is more than that, Governor Lawler; it is discrim-

ination without justification. We really have made unusual efforts to provide cars for the shipment of cattle. The bill you propose will conflict directly with the regulations of Federal Interstate Commerce. It will be unconstitutional."

"We'll risk it," smiled Lawler. "The attorney-general is certain of the constitutionality of the bill."

"We'll never obey its provisions!" declared the big man, with some warmth.

Lawler looked at the other with a level gaze. "This is a cattle-raising state," he said. "The interests of the state's citizens are sacred to me. I intend to safeguard them. You run your railroad and I will run the state. Previous railroad commissioners have permitted the railroad companies to do largely as they pleased. We are going to have some regulation — regulation that will regulate.

"The proposed bill may seem drastic to you," he added as he leaned forward the better to look out of the window he had looked out of before — to see the trim little figure he had expected coming up one of the white walks; "but if you fight it, we shall introduce others. The people of this state are pretty well worked up, and are demanding legislation that will curb the power of the railroads — that will make impossible a situation such as existed under the régime of my predecessor. What would you say to a law that would compel you to construct grade crossings at every street intersection along the right-of-way in every city and town in the state through which your railroad passes?"

The big man's color fled; he stared at Lawler.

"Also," went on Lawler; "there is an insistent demand for electrification of railroads, especially from city governments. Then, too, there is some agitation regarding rates — both freight and passenger. But I want to be fair — to go at these improvements gradually. Still, if your company insists on fighting the bill which is now pending —" He paused and looked at the big man.

The latter got up, smiling faintly.

"All right, Governor; we'll be good. I never really favored that deal — which almost set the state afire — and made you governor. But my directors ——"

"They'll be sensible, now, I hope?"

The big man grimaced. "They'll have to be sensible." He extended a hand, and Lawler took it.

The big man went out. As the door closed behind him Lawler got up and walked to it, standing there, expectantly. The door suddenly opened and Ruth stood in the opening.

It was her first visit to the office, and the atmosphere of solemn dignity almost awed her.

After a little, when she had seated herself in the governor's chair, from where she looked gayly at the big, smiling man who watched her, she got up and Lawler led her to one of the great windows.

"Father is much better, Kane," she said. "In another week he will be able to ride. Your mother sent you her love, and Shorty told me to tell you to take care of yourself. Kane, Shorty actually loves you!"

"Shorty is a man, Ruth."

"Oh, he is wonderful!" And then, with a direct look at him, she added:

"Della Wharton has gone East, Kane."

Lawler's eyes narrowed; he was silent.

Ruth's voice was tremulous with happiness as she stood close to the man she had come to marry on the morrow, in the big house which was awaiting both of them — the governor's mansion. "Kane," she said; "I used to dream of this day — tomorrow, I mean; but I never thought it would be like this — so terribly, solemnly happy."

Lawler drew her closer to him — and nearer the window. "I wonder if you know how lonesome I used to feel as I sat at my desk, there, trying to look out over that great waste of world, stretching between us?"

"I know," she said, lowly; "I used to feel the same way. There was a time — right after you went away to begin your campaign, when it seemed to me that you had gone to the farthest limits of the earth."

"And now?" he asked, smiling. And when she did not answer, he added; "the world seems to have become very small."

"It is a wonderful world, Kane," she said solemnly.

For a time both were silent, gazing out of the window. In the foreground were the bare trees of the capitol grounds; the white, curving walks, the low stone fence with its massive posts; the broad streets of the city animated by traffic; the roofs of buildings. But straight down a street that intersected the broad thoroughfare skirting the capitol grounds on the east,

they could look beyond the limits of the city at the mighty level country that stretched into the yawning gulf of distance — toward Willets; straight to the section of world which had been the scene of the conflict that had tried them sorely.

It was a bleak picture; the plains dead and drear, barren of verdure — a dull, drab expanse of waste world with no life or movement in it, stretching below gray, cold clouds.

But while they watched, a rift appeared in the clouds. It grew, expanded, and a shaft of sunlight pierced it, shimmering, glowing — touching the waste of world with a brilliance that thrilled them.

It was evident that Ruth seemed to feel that the glimmering shaft was a promise of happiness to come, for when Lawler turned, her eyes were shining with a light that caused his own to deepen with sympathy and understanding.